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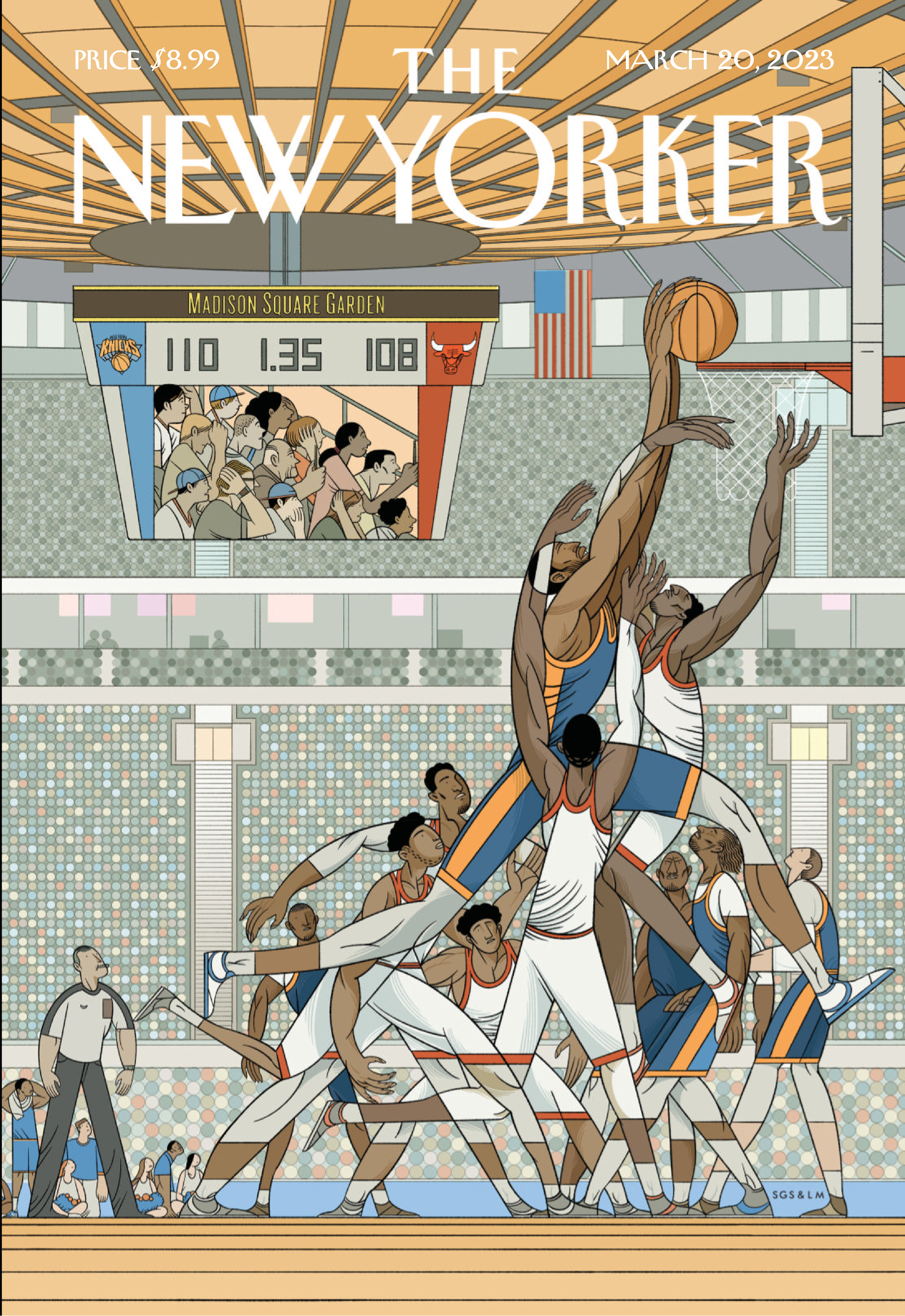
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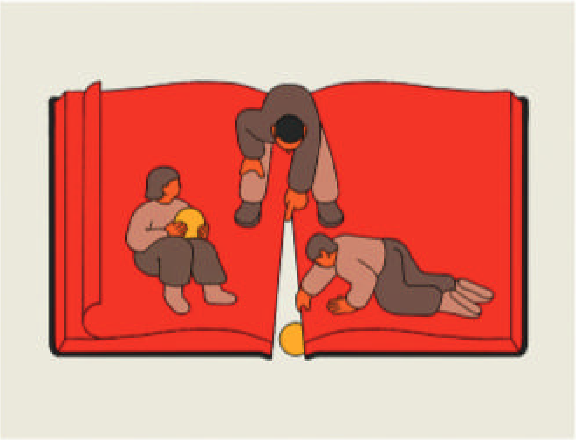
THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

ANNALS OF MEDICINE
Jessica Winter writes about postpartum psychosis, and the misconceptions and stigmas that surround it.



PAGE-TURNER
Katy Waldman on what, exactly, banning books aims to protect children from.

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LEFT: HOKYOUNG KIM; RIGHT: PAVEL POPOV

THE MAIL

QUESTIONING INDIGENEITY

In Manvir Singh's consideration of the use of the term "Indigenous," he is right to point out that the word has often been attached to the idea of primitiveness—an idea associated with racist stereotypes rooted in colonialism ("You First," February 27th). But, as he also notes, many communities prefer to self-identify as Indigenous in their political activism. Discussions among Indigenous Brazilian peoples in the wake of the recent election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as President are an interesting example of this. Lula's government initially intended to establish a Ministério dos Povos Originários (best translated as Ministry for Original Peoples), a name chosen to avoid the primitivist stereotyping tied to the word "Indigenous." The Indigenous peoples of Brazil, however, insisted on replacing "Originários" with "Indígenas," a more widely recognized and inclusive term. (We thank Altaci Rubim, of the Kokama community, for telling us about these discussions.)
Vera da Silva Sinha and Chris Sinha
Norwich, England

Singh's essay opens with a speech that the Maasai activist Moringe ole Parkipuny gave to the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1989. I attended the working group's meetings, as part of a delegation of Navajo Nation citizens and tribal officials, and I remember the event well, in part because of what it revealed about how Indigenous issues are addressed by international bodies.

The working group met in a sort of theatre-in-the-round, with the leaders seated in the center, surrounded by a semicircle of various nongovernmental organizations and their clients, behind whom sat the representatives of the member nations. At the meetings, it was the N.G.O.s, rather than the Indigenous people themselves, that had unfettered access to speaking rights. (We did not have our own speaking rights, and had to communicate through a partner N.G.O.) As a result, Indigenous groups could not participate in the discussions equally.

Who is considered Indigenous was one matter of debate during the meetings—and yet many participants could answer that question only by getting access to speaking rights through partnering N.G.O.s. For most of the Indigenous people, then, the N.G.O.s were effectively gatekeepers.

The question was important to all participants, but the Indigenous people largely seemed to know how they would answer for themselves. Their concerns had more to do with their ability to continue to live on their lands, and to do so in a world with clean air, clean water, and bountiful plants and animals.
Jon Norstog
Portland, Ore.

As a Sherpa person and an academic who focusses on Indigenous life, I was disappointed by Singh's essay. Singh questions the present-day relevance of the term "Indigenous," but he does not mention many important developments within Indigenous communities and among Indigenous scholars which have a bearing on the word's use. For one, contemporary Indigenous academics, artists, and activists have generated a vast body of work that engages with the term critically, attempting to reimagine it in ways that are emancipatory, inclusive, and decolonial. (Much of this work falls under the rubric of critical Indigenous studies.) Singh also elides the fact that much Indigenous self-identification today is based on profound human emotions related to respect, reciprocity, and intergenerational responsibility. Finally, the word "Indigenous" is still the only way for many people to make their existence visible. This is another reason for our powerful attachment to the term.
Pasang Yangjee Sherpa
Assistant Professor of Lifeways
in Indigenous Asia
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, B.C.

•

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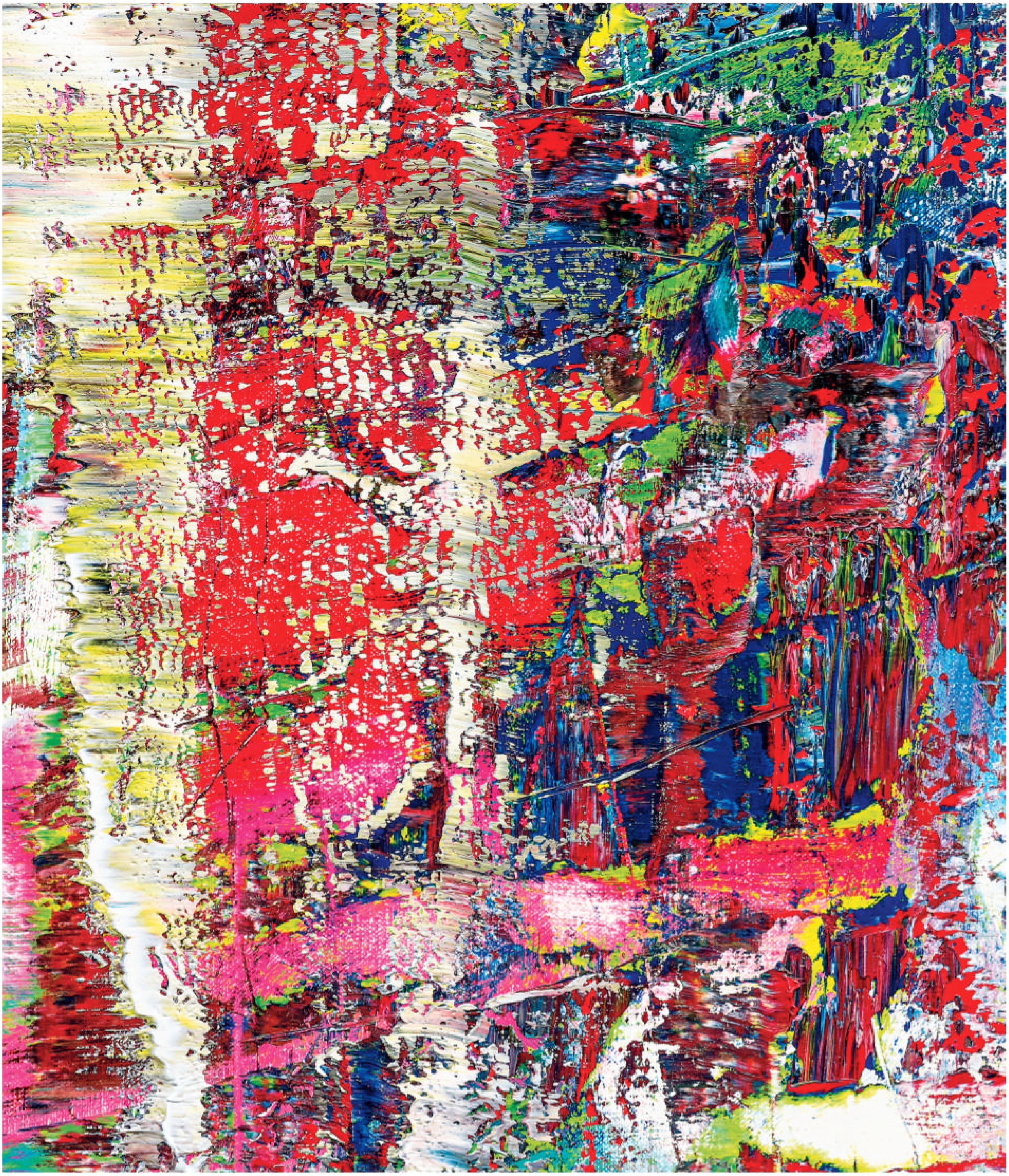
MARCH 15 – 21, 2023

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Three years ago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened a blockbuster exhibition by **Gerhard Richter**—one of the most important artists working today—that was shuttered by the pandemic after only nine days. On March 16, at the Zwirner gallery, the German painter returns to New York City with a show of works made during the past seven years, including "Abstraktes Bild (Abstract Painting)," from 2016 (seen, in detail, above). A new, limited-run publication, titled "100 Abstract Pictures," accompanies the exhibition.

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

MUSIC

Chineke! Orchestra

CLASSICAL For the piece "Fate Now Conquers," the composer Carlos Simon drew inspiration from a quote from the Iliad in Beethoven's journals: "But Fate now conquers; I am hers; and yet not she shall share in my renown; that life is left to every noble spirit." It's an apt description of the formation of the Chineke! Orchestra, which provides performing opportunities for musicians and composers from diverse, historically underrepresented backgrounds. For the European ensemble's New York City début, it plays Simon's piece, Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, and Florence Price's First Symphony, whose marvellous brass chorales give the second movement its own noble spirit. As luck—or fate—would have it, the American Composers Orchestra also plays "Fate Now Conquers" this month, at Carnegie's Zankel Hall (March 16), alongside works by Kaki King, Carlos Bandera, and Ellen Reid.—*Oussama Zahr (David Geffen Hall; March 20.)*

The Cookers

JAZZ The expiration date for inspired jazz musicians has yet to be announced; greats like Benny Carter and Clark Terry were playing with invention and passion well into their golden years. The Cookers, with the majority of the group in their eighties, may be just warming up. The sparkling ensemble revels in the edgier boundaries of modal hard bop, with peers who made their names decades ago (including Billy Harper, Eddie Henderson, and Billy Hart) playing alongside admiring younger confederates such as the trumpeter and arranger David Weiss and the alto saxophonist Donald Harrison.—*Steve Futterman (Birdland; March 15-18.)*

Angel Bat Dawid x "Untitled"

JAZZ Later this month, Chicago's spiritual-jazz virtuoso Angel Bat Dawid is releasing "Requiem for Jazz," which arrives four years after her breakthrough, "The Oracle." But for this concert, which is part of Pique-nique Recordings' imaginative "Take Two" series, Dawid focusses on a completely different LP. The "immersive deep-listening night" follows a set format: the audience absorbs an uninterrupted playback of a classic album, then vanguard musicians take the stage to reinterpret the music from a present-day vantage. For this installment, Dawid improvises her response to Nas's politically incisive, if misunderstood, untitled album, from 2008. She is joined by some fellow heavyweights of contemporary avant-garde jazz, including members of the genre deconstructionists Standing on the Corner and the drummer Tcheser Holmes, who also plays with the revolutionary free-jazz ensemble Irreversible Entanglements.—*Jenn Pelly (Public Records; March 15.)*

The Messthetics and James Brandon Lewis

ROCK Although the Washington, D.C., giants Fugazi functionally disbanded in 2003, and have not publicly reunited, the band's members have stated that the group still occasionally convenes to play together in private. The emergence of the instrumental trio the Messthetics, in 2016, featuring Fugazi's groove-heavy rhythm section of Joe Lally and Brendan Canty plus the avant-jazz guitarist Anthony Pirog, offered some inkling of proof. The Messthetics favor an ecstatic, exploratory squall that lands between starry post-rock and heaving jazz fusion. On this tour, they share the bill with the jazz tenor saxophonist James Brandon Lewis, who also explores a fractured beauty on his new album, "Eye of I." In fact, on its closing song, Lewis features the Messthetics, whom he has likened to his own trio for what he calls their "playful dance between the known and the unknown."—*J.P. (Le Poisson Rouge; March 20.)*

The Necks: "Travel"

EXPERIMENTAL The Australian avant-jazz trio the Necks formed in 1987, and have consistently made improvised music that changes shape before your ears—often so gradually that the transformations are nearly imperceptible. "Travel," the group's nineteenth studio album, showcases their singular style as effectively as any of their past work, with four songs of around twenty minutes apiece that focus on the shifting patterns of the bassist Lloyd Swanton and the drummer Tony Buck. Their grooves alternately surge and meditate, dominated by Swanton's huge tone. Cunningly, the pianist and organist Chris Abrahams plays sparely and elliptically, beckoning the listener even when the rhythm section goes fully abstract.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Streaming on select platforms.)*

Quasi

ROCK As with other rock duos, much of the fun of Quasi comes from zooming in on the way the drums—here supplied by the unflappable Janet Weiss—color their surroundings. During her tenure in Sleater-Kinney, Weiss's beat often had an agitating effect, nudging along the incandescent trio's storm. In Quasi, her playing dances around the ramshackle drone of Sam Coomes's Rock-Si-Chord keyboard, countering the haziness. "Breaking the Balls of History," the Portland, Oregon, duo's return to activity after a decade's hibernation, was born as Weiss was recovering from a nasty car crash; the musicians delight in her regained swing without touching a hair on the head of their idiosyncratic style. When, toward the record's midpoint, Coomes sings of "TikTok stars" and "kids in their virtual classes," he's a hostage holding up a newspaper—the nineties have indeed passed, the band's fervid sounds notwithstanding.—*Jay Ruttenberg (TV Eye; March 16.)*

DANCE

Parsons Dance

David Parsons's crew of adroit people-pleasers returns to the Joyce with two premières. In "Mr. Withers," Parsons draws, as he often has before, on the greatest hits of a well-loved band or musician—this time, it's the idiosyncratic soul singer-songwriter Bill Withers. "The Ride Through" is by Rena Butler, a choreographer lately in demand, with music by her go-to composer, Darryl J. Hoffman. Every program also features Parsons's strobe-light signature piece, "Caught."—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; March 15-26.)*

Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch

We mostly associate the late Pina Bausch with works such as "Café Müller" and her

R. & B.

A decade ago, the songs of the D.C.-born singer **Kelela** came to embody the increasingly boundless music of the social Web. "Take Me Apart," her tremendous album from 2017, pushed sensual R. & B. toward the avant-garde with such accomplished electronic and pop producers as Arca, Jam City, and Ariel Rechtshaid, matching breathy vocals with sleek club beat-making. She returns from a nearly six-year hiatus with "Raven," a lighter, more ambient record that follows some personal reconditioning, part of an effort to create what she calls "a more liberatory model" for herself. Queer Black people have shaped rave culture as both artists and patrons; on March 17, Kelela continues to honor that community with a show at Webster Hall.—*Sheldon Pearce*

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CONDUCTOR KENT NAGANO AND CELLIST JAN VOGLER

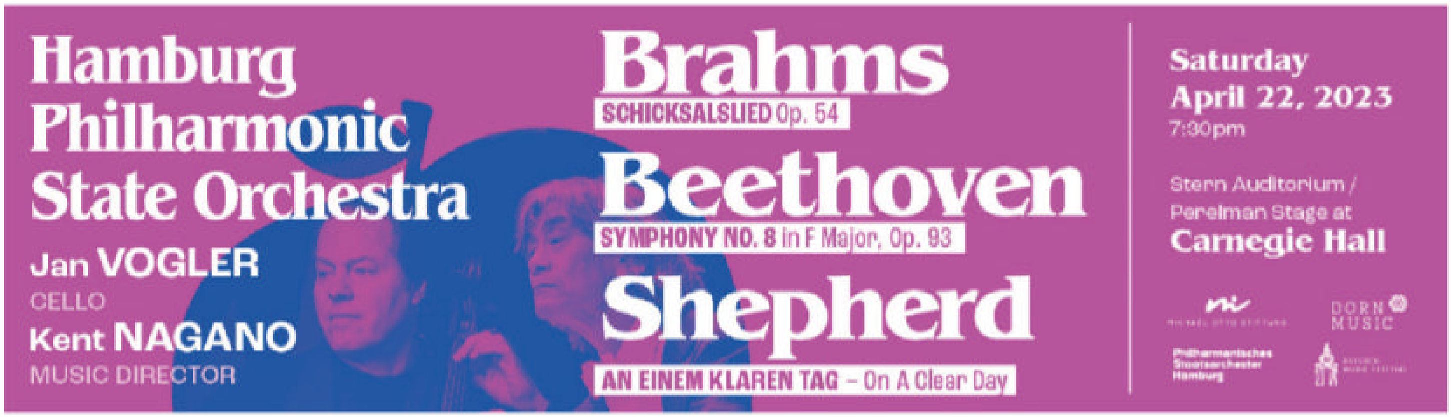
LOOK TO THE FUTURE WHILE HEARING THE PAST.

Kent Nagano and Jan Vogler have been friends for 15 years, forging a bond over their high standards, complementary opinions, and most importantly, the fact that they enjoy working together. Originally from California, Nagano has been general music director of the Hamburg Philharmonic State Orchestra since 2015; the German-born Vogler is a renowned cellist and programmer. Their newest collaboration is a consummate representation of their shared visions.

On April 22, at Carnegie Hall, Nagano and Vogler will debut a program of works presented by Dorn Music and performed by the Hamburg Philharmonic State Orchestra, which bridges past, present, and future. The first part features renditions of Brahms's "Schicksalslied", Op. 54, and Beethoven's "Symphony No. 8". In the second half, Nagano conducts a world premiere of American composer Sean Shepherd's "An Einem Klaren Tag – On A Clear Day," commissioned by the Dresden Music Festival and the Hamburg Philharmonic State Orchestra for solo cello, choir, and orchestra. Shepherd's new work incorporates text by Ulla Hahn, a renowned German author and poet whose works aren't widely available in English.

The performance of "An Einem Klaren Tag" also showcases members of five separate youth choirs: The Young ClassX, Audi Jugendchorakademie, Hamburger Alsterspatzen (Youth Choir of the Hamburg State Opera), the Dresdner Kreuzchor (a renowned children's choir from Dresden), and the Young New Yorkers' Chorus. The assemblage manifests the multigenerational, international reach of the artists, which will travel to Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie on April 28 and 30, with a final stop at the Dresden Music Festival on May 5.

Vogler stresses these concerts are "not to be missed." Here, he and Nagano discuss their collaboration and the program.



Hamburg Philharmonic State Orchestra
Jan VOGLER
CELLO
Kent NAGANO
MUSIC DIRECTOR

Brahms
SCHICKSALSLIED Op. 54
Beethoven
SYMPHONY NO. 8 in F Major, Op. 93
Shepherd
AN EINEM KLAREN TAG – On A Clear Day

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BLACKAND WHITE
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DRESDEN
MUSIC FESTIVAL
BY
OLIVER KILLIG

Jan, as the artistic director of the Dresden Music Festival in Germany, what can you say about this year's festival?

Vogler: This year's festival in Dresden takes place from May 18 to June 18. The program reflects new trends and bridges different music worlds. Alongside great artists from the classical music scene, you will see performers from the fields of world music and jazz. It is essential at this point in history to build bridges to other music genres and cultures. Since I live in Dresden and New York City, the festival program is very much inspired by a transatlantic dialogue.

How did you arrive at the theme of this year's Dresden Music Festival, "Black and White"?

Vogler: It's a bit of a provocation. Obviously, we want the audience to enjoy the fantastic contrasts in music. But is our world really black and white? Can music find nuances that are lost in verbal communication and, with sensitivity, maybe change the world a little bit? Collaboration and communication are essential in our global community—a lot of it is non-verbal and music can transcend us to different universes within moments. Sean Shepherd's new work could have this wonderful effect on the audience, providing a moment away from earth and yet deeply connected with humanity.

How does the world premiere at Carnegie Hall reflect that theme?

Nagano: I would stress the historical ties between Dresden, Hamburg, and New York. They were tied together through the harbors of Hamburg and New York. All three cities grew independently, but at the same time, they're bridged together culturally. This program is a metaphor for the bridge: an American composer; an iconic, Hamburg-based German poet; together with a solo cellist from Dresden.

And Kent, you'll be debuting "Wagners Lesarten (Wagner Readings)" at the Dresden Music Festival?

Nagano: Yes. It's a research project on an historically informed performance practice, based on intense research into Wagner's own work. We are publishing the first installment of five years of research.

Do you see any thematic unity between the program at Carnegie Hall and "Wagners Lesarten"?

Nagano: Both are based on storytelling. In our upcoming concert, Ulla Hahn's text and Sean Shepherd's writing will tell a story through an oratorial form. And Wagner's "Der Ring des Niebelungen" is the distillation of storytelling. In that sense, through the medium of music you tell a story.

DRESDEN MUSIC FESTIVAL

The Dresden Music Festival is one of the largest and most highly acclaimed classical music festivals in Europe, presenting a top-class program of extraordinary density and variety every May and June. In dialogue between the important and leading voices of the classical music scene and the unique cultural and historical surroundings, the festival builds fascinating bridges between tradition and innovation, acting as an ambassador for an open-minded, diverse coexistence.

More than twenty performance venues – including historical Dresden landmarks such as the Semperoper, the Frauenkirche or the Kulturpalast, but also modern industrial buildings and open-air venues – are transformed into concert stages for world-famous soloists, orchestras and ensembles who perform alongside jazz, rock, pop and world music stars.

Since 2009 the internationally renowned cellist Jan Vogler has been the festival's Artistic Director. Under his leadership, the festival, which was founded in 1978, has further expanded its worldwide renown.

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MUSIC FESTIVAL

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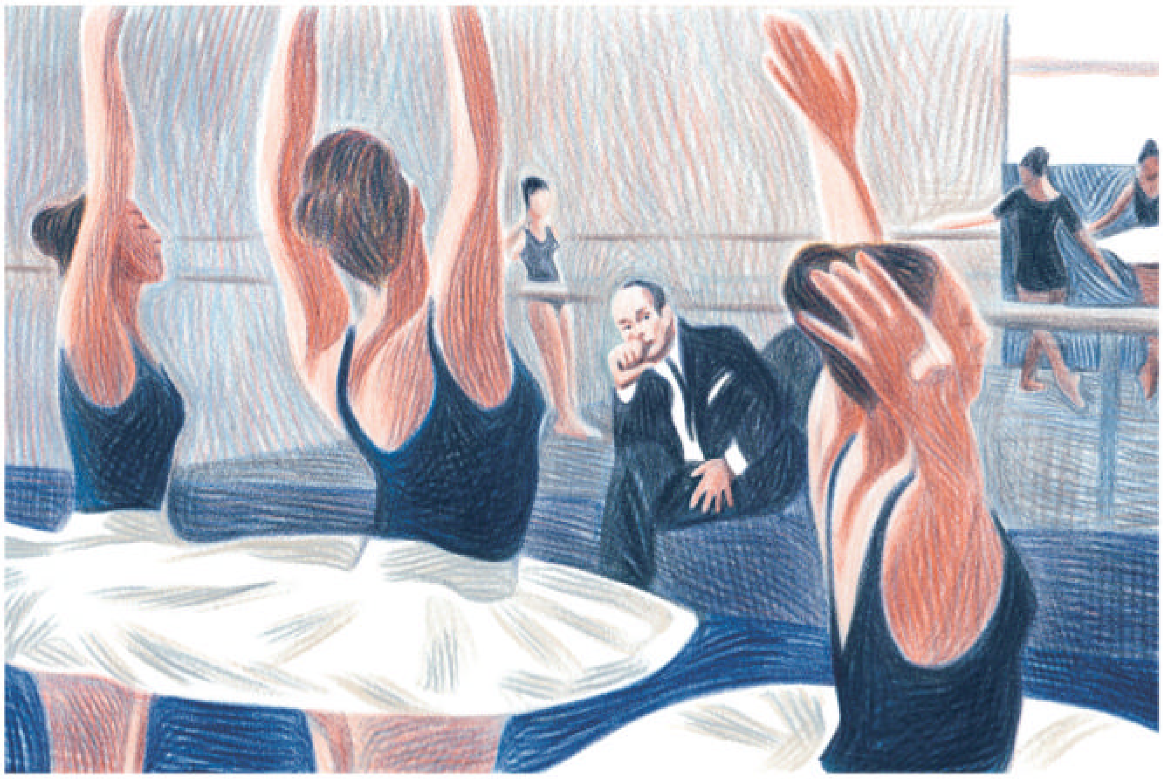


The first season of "The Turning," an investigative podcast series hosted by the Minnesota-based producer and reporter Erika Lantz, focussed on a group of women who joined the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa's secretive order of nuns—and who then decided to leave. The nuanced podcast, which aired in 2021, explored why these women, once so devoted to the cause that they cut off all external relationships, chose to renounce the cloistered life. Lantz's interviews with the former sisters were suffused with gentle, patient empathy; she listens as much as she speaks, absorbs as much as she opines. Now Lantz is back with a second installment: **"The Turning: Room of Mirrors"** (from Rococo Punch and iHeartRadio) tells the stories of several ballerinas who worked with the demanding, brilliant, and often cryptic choreographer George Balanchine, a man who legendarily practiced his dancers until their feet were bleeding. Lantz's core project—treating women's experiences of commitment and sacrifice with grace and genuine curiosity—is back in full force. There are hints of "Black Swan," if you're in the market for ballet horror stories, but there are also searching, swirling meditations on what it means to devote your body entirely to your art.—*Rachel Syme*

"Rite of Spring," dances that peek into the nightmarish corners of the human heart. But, in her later years, Bausch made a series of dances inspired by places where her company took up residence for months at a time. "Água," which Tanztheater Wuppertal brings to BAM, was created in 2001, following a period spent in São Paolo. It is among Bausch's most sensual, fluid, and dreamy constructions, transmitting the pure joy of being alive, mixed with the pleasure of sensation.—*Marina Harss (Howard Gilman Opera House; through March 19.)*

THE THEATRE

Public Obscenities

When the Bengali American Ph.D. student Choton (Abrar Haque) brings his cinematographer boyfriend, Raheem (Jakeem Dante Powell), to a family home in Kolkata on a research trip, we assume that Choton understands the dynamics among his aunt (Gargi Mukherjee) and uncle (Debashis Roy Chowdhury) and their household caretaker (Golam Sarwar Harun). He speaks Bangla, after all, translating for Raheem, teaching him to tuck in his malaria net, and interviewing locals about the Indian queer scene. However, Raheem's careful eye sees things that Choton can't. Love stories hide in obscure places, such as an online pool-playing app (projected on a wall onstage) or the family's past, and only assiduous attention can reveal them. The playwright-director Shayok Misha Chowdhury's bilingual text and production are both gorgeously precise. The night I went, a scene between Choton and an interview subject, Shou (the delightful Tashnuva Anan), wasn't supertitled, yet even the non-Bangla-speaking members of the audience stayed rapt. It was a projection error, and the company played the scene again with the translation. But it was a testament to how convincingly Chowdhury had built his world—and to how carefully he had taught us to listen.—*Helen Shaw (Soho Rep; through April 9.)*

The Seagull/Woodstock, NY

Thomas Bradshaw is a strange choice to adapt Anton Chekhov's famously layered 1895 drama—Bradshaw's customary technique (in plays such as "Burning" and "Southern Promises") is to replace psychological richness with flat affects and sexual or racial provocation. Led by Parker Posey's zoned-out Irene, a conceited actress and a neglectful mom to the playwright-wannabe Kevin (Nat Wolff), the cast here seems as heartlessly privileged as a "White Lotus" ensemble—in this Woodstock retreat, people only make art because they hate or envy one another, and the youths, surrounded by wealthy benefactors who won't give, don't work. Bradshaw's updated plot now contains social media and an electric Bentley, but the biggest change is Kevin's play-within-a-play, in which Nina (Aleyse Shannon) masturbates for one lucky watcher, the leering William (Ato Essandoh). To match Bradshaw's pessimistic humor, actors bark or drone their lines; only Hari Nef, playing the lovelorn Sasha, vamps lusciously. I found the world bleak beyond words, but the audience members around me howled with laughter. I hated them; I envied them. It was like we were all in Woodstock.—*H.S. (Pershing Square Signature Center; through April 9.)*

The Trees

In Agnes Borinsky's eco-fable, a brother, David (Jess Barbagallo), and sister, Sheila (Crystal A. Dickinson), find themselves fixed in place—in a fairy-tale metamorphosis, they've grown literal roots. David's ex (an amusingly fussy Sean Donovan) gets the Parks Department to call them trees, and the designation protects them for a while. Friends, a grandma, and lovers gather; a rabbi wonders what this miracle portends; a local food vender buys the land to develop it into a mall. Neither that crisis nor the meaning of the miracle materialize. In this sometimes frustrating show, Borinsky demonstrates how caring for the not-human can build community health—the sibling-trees need constant attention, which creates a gathered family. But certain design choices, such as the candy-colored or tie-dyed costumes everyone wears, link this instructive project rather too closely to children's theatre, as does the director Tina Satter's choice of acting styles—there's an emphasis on careful diction, simplicity, and dropping-by-a-picnic energy. For some, this will be a paradise, yet, for less patient audience members, like me, the dramaturgical soil soon seems a little thin.—*H.S. (Playwrights Horizons; through March 19.)*

ART

Miyoko Ito

Five years ago, Artists Space introduced New Yorkers to this wonderful Japanese American painter, who died in 1983 and whose work deserves to be more widely known. This exhibition offers a fascinating, if abbreviated, retrospective

ILLUSTRATION BY CAROLINE PÉRON

of her career. In many of Ito's methodically layered compositions, archways open onto dusky, abstract-surrealist landscapes—or they become mirrors, reflecting strange, stylized interiors. Born in California in 1918, the artist was forced into an internment camp during the Second World War; she later completed her education and settled in Chicago, becoming an informal, outlier member of the Chicago Imagists. Ito's scumbled, stuccolike surfaces distinguish her work from that of her peers, as does her lack of interest in pop-culture references and comic figuration. But, in her own quiet way, she does share her Chicago cohort's quirky, humane delirium. Visitors to the exhibition can trace Ito's stylistic evolution from a Cubist-influenced still-life, painted in 1948, and the velvety "Jordan," made circa 1959, with its moody palette and tubular forms, to works from the seventies and early eighties whose carefully scalloped shapes and gradating expanses, in shades of gold, terra-cotta, and sage, have an irresistible, muted depth.—*Johanna Fateman (Matthew Marks; through April 15.)*

"Jimmy DeSana: Submission"

DeSana's reputation might have died when his life ended, in 1990, as a result of AIDS. He was only forty years old. The New York-based photographer was busy, prolific, and popular during his lifetime—he was included in the buzzy exhibitions "The Times Square Show" and "New York/New Wave," in the early eighties—but, in hindsight, he seemed stranded at the edge of the scene. This new retrospective makes a strong case for his ongoing relevance. From the beginning, DeSana's work was erotic, compulsive, gender-fluid, and all the more unsettling for its comic flashes. The show opens with a wall-filling grid of fifty-six voyeuristic, black-and-white pictures from 1972—student work, made in imitation of amateur porn and flea-market snapshots. Nearby hang later examples of DeSana's stylized portraiture, featuring the likes of William S. Burroughs, Debby Harry, Billy Idol, and Laurie Anderson. At a moment when the counterculture had come to define the culture, DeSana played a key role, turning rising stars into hipster pinups. He also dabbled in S & M, portraying unlikely collisions of bodies and objects, all luridly lit: a red high heel trapped under pantyhose, a suspended figure with his head in a foaming toilet bowl, a screaming mouth full of cocktail toothpicks. The effect is a cross between David Cronenberg's body horror and Guy Bourdin's fashionable fetishism. At once laughable and alarming, playful and lethal, DeSana's work still lands like a psychological time bomb.—*Vince Aletti (Brooklyn Museum; through April 16.)*

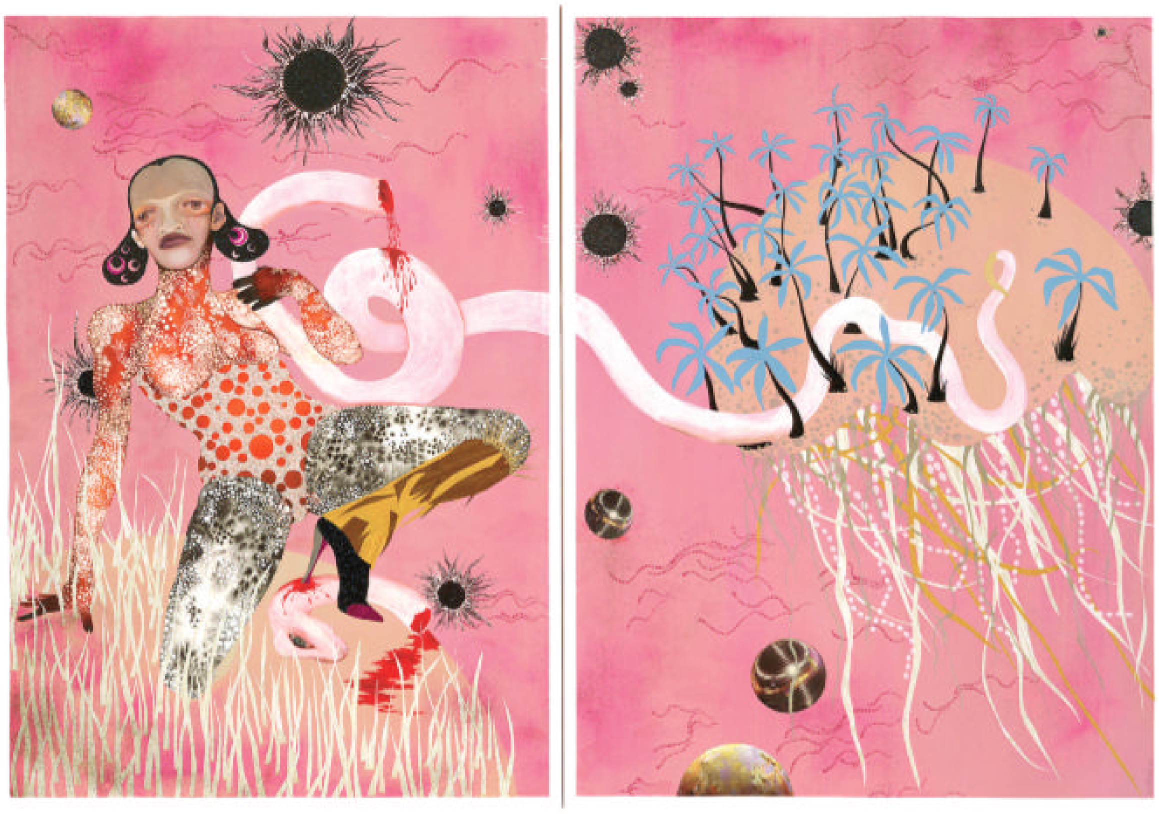
"Lives of the Gods: Divinity in Maya Art"

Per a Mayan myth, when the world began, in 3114 B.C., it took the gods three tries to get humans right. The first attempt, using mud, was a wash; wood didn't make the cut, either. Finally, corn hit the spot, and people came into being. A few millennia later, Mayan artists paid homage to their makers by creating dazzling figures themselves, notably during the Classic period, between 250 and 900 A.D. (They also portrayed powerful mortals.) A hundred such works—in stone, painted ceramic, obsidian, jade, conch shell, and some (very rare) carvings in wood—are on view in this magnificent show at the Met. It presents a culture of enticing complexity, in which the immortals who conceived the sun, the moon, and the rain (to name some of the show's major themes) were fearsome but never invulnerable. One sandstone sculpture, from around 700 A.D., was made for the Centipede Kings, who ruled Tonina, a Mayan city in modern-day Chiapas, Mexico; it portrays Yax Ahk', a historical warrior, and a royal himself, who was captured as a prisoner of war and forced to impersonate a jaguar deity who had been burned to death. Happily, rebirth was possible, too: the dramatically installed exhibition includes several exquisitely modelled clay whistles, in which tiny maize gods emerge from flowers, newborns in full ceremonial regalia.—*Andrea K. Scott (Metropolitan Museum of Art; through April 2.)*

Hew Locke

Two large model boats, nearly wrecked and loaded with mysterious freight, are suspended from the ceiling in this British artist's new show, "Listening to the Land." Another compelling object of weathered intricacy is "Jumbie House 2," a sculptural domicile on stilts, with marigold siding and a purple corrugated roof; it's based on an abandoned plantation house in Guyana, the country where Locke spent his childhood. In these three works, made in 2022, the artist's long-standing motifs—of land, sea, and colonial wealth—assume a fantastic dimension and a shambolic gravitas. The tattered, patchwork sails of the boats—titled "The Relic" and "The Survivor"—feature festive prints, as well as photo transfers depicting nineteenth-century boat loaders and sugarcane cutters. On the walls, scenes of flooded or vulnerable coastal structures are joined by brightly colored mixed-media works, which incorporate antique stock certificates that echo the imagery on the sails. Throughout the exhibition, water looms large as a metaphorical force—a rising threat in the age of climate change.—*J.F. (P.P.O.W.; through April 1.)*

IN THE MUSEUMS



COURTESY THE ARTIST / NEW MUSEUM

In 2003, when the blazingly talented Wangechi Mutu was invited to participate in a show at the New Museum about the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti, she made a seven-foot-long hybrid of watercolor and collage titled "Yo Mama" (pictured above). It's an homage to Kuti's mother, the human-rights activist Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, whom Mutu transformed into a cosmic power figure—at once a vanquisher and a vamp, occupying a shell-pink world with many black suns, in which a jellyfish is also a palm-studded island. Twenty years later, the piece returns to the New Museum, joining a hundred or so collages, sculptures, installations, filmed performances, animations, and more in the mid-career retrospective **"Wangechi Mutu: Intertwined,"** on view through June 4. (It's the first time the museum is devoting its entire building to a single artist.) Whether she is working with the red soil of her native Kenya (the artist divides her time between Nairobi and Brooklyn) or casting in bronze, Mutu grafts together subjects aquatic and terrestrial, futuristic and ancestral, and grotesque and exquisite to create speculative fictions of incantatory beauty, in which utopian visions and lacerating critiques of colonialist legacies are not mutually exclusive.—*Andrea K. Scott*

MOVIES

Beeswax

Business really is at the center of this sweet-toned romantic drama, from 2009, by the director Andrew Bujalski, which focusses on the economic lives of twentysomethings. He imbues the behind-the-scenes intrigue surrounding a vintage-clothing boutique in Austin, Texas, with deeply lived everyday passions. Jeannie (Tilly Hatcher), who runs the store, gets around in a wheelchair; Bujalski films her ordinary challenges with unsentimental candor. She fears being sued by her estranged business partner (Anne Dodge), and when she turns to her friend Merrill (Alex Karpovsky), who's in law school, for help, he offers his counsel and then some. Meanwhile, Jeannie's roommate and sister, Lauren (Maggie Hatcher, Tilly's real-life sister), faces crucial decisions that risk impinging on Jeannie's course of action. Bujalski's abiding fascination with and respect for work twists ironically around his characters' preference for its straightforward demands over the open-ended ambiguities of love. He brings together a tangy array of people whose place in the economy is sketched as clearly as their place in the chain of affections, and gets at the power relations that the most intimate connections depend on.—*Richard Brody (Playing March 17-18 at Metrograph and streaming on Apple TV, Kanopy, and other services.)*

Boy Meets Girl

The meteoric first film by the French director Leos Carax, from 1984, hurls Alex (Denis Lavant)—an aspiring filmmaker in his twenties—out of one desperately romantic relationship and into another, through a permanently nocturnal Parisian atmosphere of poetic coincidences and crazy risks. Alex lives in a garret where he maps, on a wall, the urban sites of his great initiation experiences; he writes love letters on a typewriter and saves them for his autobiography, shoplifts books and records, and scuffles around pinball machines in downbeat cafés. On the eve of his departure for the Army (military service still being compulsory in France at the time), he crashes a party and meets a woman (Mireille Perrier) whose boyfriend left her via intercom. Lucid, sardonic, cinema-centric asides (especially one great set piece involving an aged, hearing-impaired movie technician from the silent-film era) adorn their all-night tangle of intimacy, building to a grungy, furiously self-deprecating Liebestod. Ecstatic cinema and ecstatic living join together in a pressurized promise of glory and misery, a flameout waiting to happen—and to be filmed.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel and Prime Video.)*

A King in New York

Charlie Chaplin, directing himself in his last starring role, lets fly with anarchic humor and political outrage. He plays the refined and worthy King Shahdov, deposed and exiled from the land of Estrovia for his rejection of nuclear arms, who arrives in New York as a broke celebrity and is taught by a pushy and seductive adwoman (Dawn Addams) how to cash in on his fame—at the price of his dignity. Chaplin—who, at the time the film was released, in 1957, was nearing seventy and banned from the U.S. on political grounds—lacerates American follies with razor-sharp comic ingenuity. His targets include rock music, popular movies, plastic surgery, money worship, progressive schools, and media vulgarity (his riotous invention of the "Real Life Surprise Party" broadcast foreshadows the age of reality TV), but he reserves his fiercest barbs for the McCarthyite campaign of intimidation and cruelty that he himself had endured. Chaplin disdainfully, derisively satirizes his real-life accusers, and he casts his young son, Michael, in the wrenching role of a precocious ideologue whose father is an unfriendly witness.—*R.B. (Streaming on HBO Max.)*

Strange Days

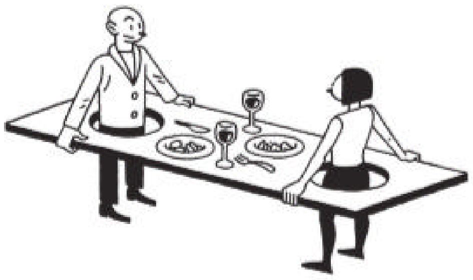
The year 2000 is hours away, the streets of Los Angeles are erupting with civil strife, and Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes) is up to his stubble in bad news. Lenny records people's mental lives—every feeling and sensation—on disk; it's a scummy business, and it suddenly gets worse when he receives a couple of disks that appear to show police racism, rape, and murder. (The movie, from 1995, is like a mad fantasia on the Rodney King episode.) Enlisting the help of Max (Tom Sizemore) and Mace (Angela Bassett), Lenny sets out to crack the case. But, for the director, Kathryn Bigelow, this setup is mainly an excuse to let it rip. This was her loudest, most rebellious movie to date: she shifted away from her earlier, sleeker manner and arrived at a relentlessly wired style. Inspired by her excess, some of the actors head straight over the top—especially Juliette Lewis, playing Lenny's old girlfriend. But Fiennes holds steady; his moody, lonely performance, especially in the beguiling first half hour, lends the story an air of calm despair. Screenplay by James Cameron and Jay Cocks.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/9/95.) (Streaming on HBO Max.)*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

ON THE BIG SCREEN

A highlight of the First Look festival, which runs March 15-19 at Museum of the Moving Image, is Babak Jalali's **"Fremont,"** a drama with a spare, wry tone that belies its earnest and ample substance. It's the story of a twentysomething Afghan woman named Donya (Anaita Wali Zada), a former translator for the U.S. Army in Kabul who was evacuated when the Taliban returned and is living in the California city of the film's title. Donya is haunted by the fate of her family and others who couldn't escape; yet, because she worked for the American government, she's considered a traitor by many at home, and also by a fellow-refugee (Timur Nusratty) who lives in the same apartment complex. Her job in a fortune-cookie factory offers comedy and company, but her sense of isolation deepens, and a quirky psychiatrist (Gregg Turkington) tries to help. Jalali (who wrote the script with Carolina Cavalli) presents the action in sharply detailed vignettes, filmed in mainly static black-and-white images, that emphasize both the poignant absurdities of Donya's situation and the wider conflicts that underlie them. Zada, a journalist in her first movie role, endows her character with pensive depths and a shudder at what they contain.—*Richard Brody*

COURTESY FIRST LOOK FESTIVAL AT MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE



TABLES FOR TWO

Japanese Breakfast in Brooklyn

I can easily summon the pang of desire I felt some years ago when, scrolling through Instagram, I first laid eyes on the *teishoku*, or set meal, served for breakfast at the Park Hyatt Tokyo. I wanted to get on the next plane to Japan, to try for myself the delicate-looking pieces of grilled fish, presented alongside small bowls of cloudy miso soup and glossy white rice, wedges of fresh tofu and *tamago* (a Japanese omelette), berries and cubed melon, and a pot of tea. Japanese breakfast: a meal so beautiful that the writer and musician Michelle Zauner named her band after it.

With no plans to travel, I was delighted to find a similarly captivating *teishoku* on a quiet block in Williamsburg, at a tiny restaurant called Okonomi (150 Ainslie St.; breakfast set starts at $30), to which I returned recently. The *teishoku* was as exquisite as ever, as balanced and nourishing as it was genuinely thrilling, an optimal combination for the first meal of the day. A rhombus of salt-baked amberjack, its skin like hammered pewter, shared a plate with a few half-moons of roasted delicata squash, wispy bonito flakes clinging to their sticky surface; a floret of barely steamed broccoli rabe, dolloped with *shira-ae*, or miso-tofu purée; a square of slightly sweet, custardy *tamago* with caramelized edges; pickled cucumber and daikon radish; and a pile of spicy braised burdock root flecked with sesame seeds. On the side was miso soup and mixed-grain rice, to which I added a slippery poached egg bathed in sweet soy sauce.

For a long time, Okonomi was basically the only place in town to get a traditional Japanese breakfast. As of late, there is serious competition. Among the businesses at 50 Norman, a Japanese marketplace in a former garage in Greenpoint, is Dashi Okume (50 Norman Ave.), a shop that specializes in dashi, the Japanese soup base, which you can buy premade, or, better yet, have mixed to order from your choice of ingredients. Okume also offers a streamlined menu of lovely *teishoku* (from $35; available starting at 11 A.M., just under the breakfast wire), featuring fish flown in from Tokyo (steam-baked salmon; mackerel dried in volcanic ash) plus miso soup made from the house dashi, rice, pickled cucumbers, green or roasted buckwheat tea, and sides such as simmered kabocha, recently, and deep-fried eggplant soaked in dashi.

Around the corner from 50 Norman is a restaurant called Rule of Thirds (171 Banker St.), opened in 2020 by two former Okonomi chefs. The weekend-only brunch menu includes a hot-honey-yuzu salad and a stunning soufflé pancake, soft enough to eat with a spoon, and a *teishoku* ($28) that suggests the student has become the master. One Sunday not long ago, a piece of miso-marinated, silky-fleshed roasted bluefish was served with a dollop of yuzu kosho (a desert-island condiment made from chilies fermented with yuzu zest and salt), a bowl of dashi poured over carrots, cabbage, and wood-ear mushrooms, short-grain rice topped with a poached egg, and the restaurant's signature, spectacular almond miso soup.

If three's a trend, four is a godsend. The following Saturday, I went to brunch at OStudio (366 Stockton St.), an artists' collective and wine bar in Bed-Stuy, where the chef Greg Wong, formerly of Estela and Mission Chinese Food, had taken temporary residence. Wong's "Asian breakfast set" resembled a *teishoku*, although, as he was careful to point out, it leaned Korean: the roasted mackerel fillet, its skin speckled with char, had been cured in *doenjang*, as had the egg yolks he used to make a sort of yuzu aioli to go with it. Among the accompanying vegetables were a wheel of lotus root, braised in soy and honey but still crunchy; a tangle of wilted pea shoots finished with Cara Cara ponzu; and a generous spoonful of wonderfully fudgy purple-potato salad. Tokyo can wait.

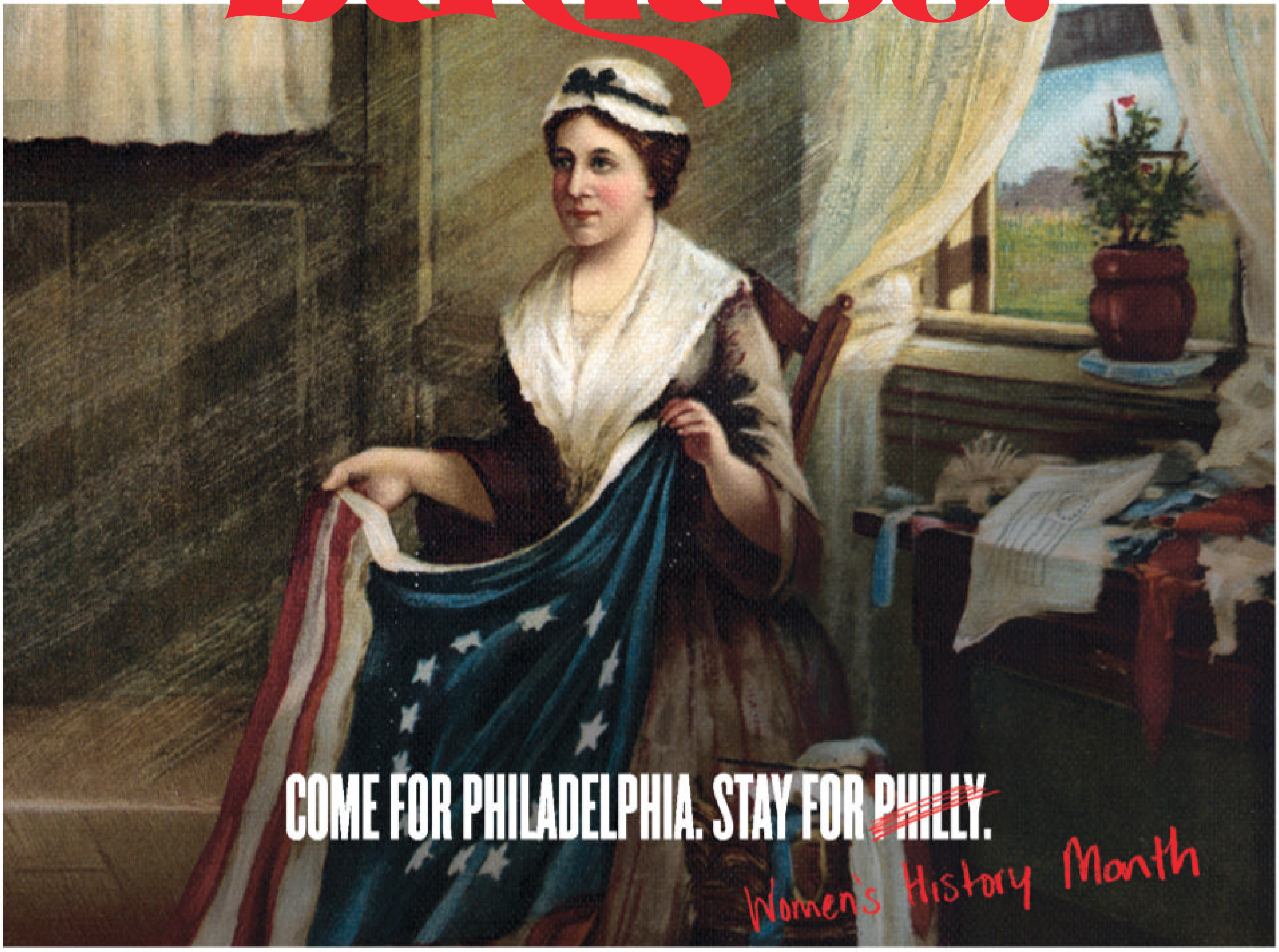
—*Hannah Goldfield*

PHOTOGRAPH BY KYOKO HAMADA FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

BEN WAS AWESOME,

BUT LET'S BE REAL,

Betsy was the real badass.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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
PILL BATTLES

More than half of abortions in the United States are accomplished with pills, rather than with surgeries. So, when the Supreme Court eliminated the constitutional right to abortion, last year, allowing states to regulate and prohibit abortion as they wish, an inevitable battle in the ensuing war was going to involve pharmacists. Mifepristone, which has been F.D.A.-approved for medication abortions since 2000, causes the uterine lining to break down, thereby terminating a pregnancy. A second drug, misoprostol, which is approved for multiple medical purposes, is used afterward to vacate the uterus. As states have banned or restricted abortion, access to these pills has become the focus of conflict in the new legal landscape.

A week after the Court's decision overruling Roe v. Wade, the U.S. Postal Service asked the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel for advice about an existing federal statute that makes it a felony to mail anything "designed, adapted or intended for producing abortion, or for any indecent or immoral use." The statute, which also prohibits mailing "obscene, lewd, lascivious, indecent, filthy or vile" materials, is a vestige of the Comstock Act of 1873, the work of Anthony Comstock, an infamous crusader against the corruption of public morals who became a special agent of the Postal Service. The question was whether that statute prohibits sending and delivering abortion drugs by mail. In December, the O.L.C. answered that the statute does allow the mailing of abortion pills "where the sender lacks the intent that the recipient of the drugs will use them unlawfully," and that the "mere mailing" of the pills does not establish that intent. That is because no states have banned abortion in all circumstances, with many retaining exceptions for rape or for protecting a pregnant person's life. Abortion being legal in those circumstances, a pharmacist could lawfully mail the pills, even to states where abortion is mostly illegal, because the sender would lack the intent that the pills would produce abortions of the unlawful kind.

Earlier this year, the F.D.A. announced that retail pharmacies could become certified to dispense mifepristone, including by shipping it to patients, and Walgreens announced that it would apply for certification. In response, nearly two dozen Republican state attorneys general sent letters to Walgreens, CVS, and other large pharmacies, claiming that the statute's "plain text" prohibiting the mailing of any materials "for producing abortion"—and not what they called the O.L.C.'s "bizarre interpretation"—should be decisive. The A.G.s warned that, regardless of the federal government's view, they could enforce the statute through civil litigation. And, they noted, many state laws also disallow using the mail to send and receive abortion drugs.

The O.L.C.'s interpretation is based on twentieth-century federal cases that declined to construe the statute literally, as doing so would criminalize the mailing of items that have lawful purposes, just because they can also be used for unlawful ones. Conservatives maintain that the statute makes no distinction between lawful and unlawful abortions, and so it prohibits mailing things intended to produce abortions, full stop.

Danielle Gray, Walgreens' global chief legal officer, quickly responded to the red-state A.G.s by clarifying that the company will still seek certification to dispense mifepristone, but that it does not intend to ship it to people in their states. Gray was a law clerk for Merrick Garland when he was a judge on the D.C. Circuit, and for Justice Stephen Breyer when he was on the Supreme Court, and during the Obama Administration she served in the White House counsel's office and as the Cabinet Secretary. She is plenty confident when it comes to legal interpretation.

The Walgreens decision, though, has resulted in calls for boycotts, a drop in the company's stock, and blowback from Democratic governors, including

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

Gavin Newsom, of California, whose office is withdrawing from a fifty-four-million-dollar contract with the company and "reviewing all relationships between Walgreens and the state." Notwithstanding accusations of cowardice for "caving" to Republican threats, however, a different decision by Walgreens or other companies could subject pharmacists to criminal liability and civil actions. Even federal prosecutions for mailing the pills are imaginable if a Republican Administration is installed and rejects the Biden O.L.C.'s opinion. And federal courts, now filled with Trump appointees, may well highlight the statute's text, rather than past court interpretations. Not to mention that defying state A.G.s could place the companies' state pharmaceutical licenses at risk.

A precursor to the mailing of pills, of course, was the F.D.A.'s approval of them, which is now also under legal attack, twenty-three years after the fact. Last month, nearly two dozen Republican-led states filed an amicus brief supporting a federal lawsuit in Texas, claiming that approving mifepristone for abortion had violated the F.D.A.'s own rules. The regulations, they said, permit approval of drugs "that have been studied for their safety and effectiveness in treating serious or life-threatening illnesses," which they allege does not cover pregnancy. The judge in the case, a pro-life Trump appointee, may order the agency to rescind its approval of the drug, and possibly halt its availability nationwide.

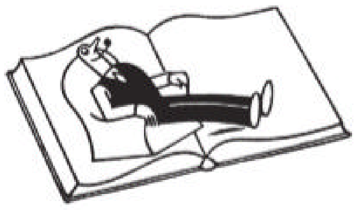
That lawsuit was countered last month by a separate one, in which twelve Democratic states are asking a federal court in Washington State to find the F.D.A.'s approval of mifepristone valid and prevent its removal from the market. The suit also challenges the agency's special restrictions on access to the drug—for example, the requirement that pharmacies be certified to dispense it and, further, that they confirm that the prescription is from a certified provider. If the two federal cases result in conflicting orders, the Supreme Court will soon find itself presented with another abortion case. So much for federal courts getting out of the "abortion-umpiring business," as Justice Antonin Scalia once put it.

But, beyond lawsuits and boycotts, the proper target for pro-choice complaints is Congress. It has not managed to pass the Women's Health Protection Act, which would establish a federal statutory abortion right to replace the constitutional right that the Court removed. And it has never repealed the Comstock Act, leaving us in the situation where nineteenth-century sexual morality now shapes the twenty-first-century abortion debate. Still, as the branch constitutionally empowered to make laws for the nation, Congress should, at the very least, amend the statute to make it clear that drugs can be mailed for lawful abortions. Alas, that would resolve but one legal interpretative front in the ongoing war of red versus blue states, and of federal versus state governments.

—*Jeannie Suk Gersen*

GONE SOUTH

OXYMORON



When Billy Collins tells his New York City friends that he moved to Winter Park, Florida, they give him looks. "Florida has a very strong stigma right now," Collins, a former Poet Laureate of both the U.S. and New York State, said the other day. "Ron DeSantis has reached a new level of trespass and overstepping." He went on, "But I don't wake up in the morning and think about the governor and what college boards he's changing or what books he's banning."

It was the kind of warm afternoon that makes winter-weary New Yorkers jealous. Collins, a Queens native, was in the driveway of his banana-pudding-yellow house. He strolled onto a brick street leading down to a lake.

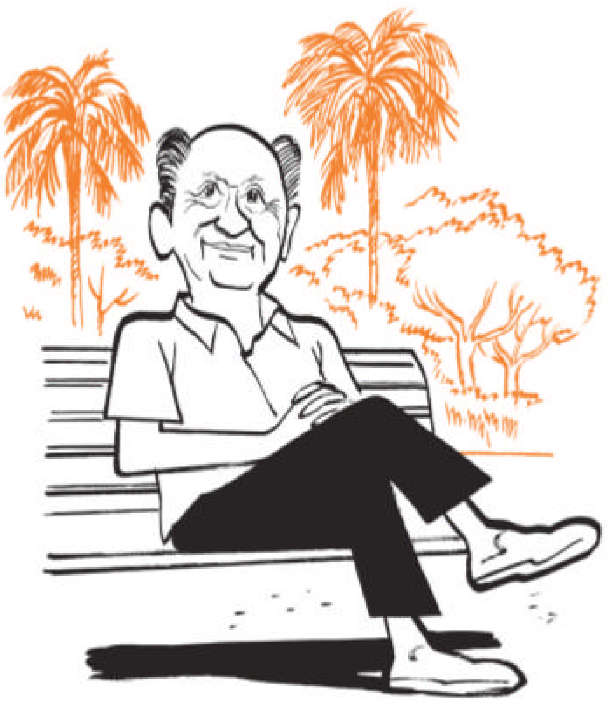
"I wanted to live in America, and Florida is America," he said. He misses the Grand Central Oyster Bar (he lived in Westchester for years) and being able to attend as many readings and jazz concerts as he used to. But he appreciates feeling liberated from the constant tug of cultural obligations.

"I'm in Florida but not of Florida," he likes to say of the state where "woke goes to die."

Collins is a lean eighty-one, with the frequently raised eyebrow of a cynical teen-ager. As he ambled through his airy upscale neighborhood ("Five miles away it's overdeveloped and red," he noted), he admired a lawn sign reading "Dog Library" beside a pile of old tennis balls and sticks. "That's part of what I call the adorability factor here, and I give it one hundred points," he said. He added that women with ponytails riding bikes with dogs in wicker baskets score high, too. Overhead, above oak trees with Spanish moss that he compared to ZZ Top beards, he noticed an anhinga (he once wrote about the cormorant-adjacent bird in a poem) and a Delta jet. (For a few years, he had a poetry channel on the airline's in-flight-entertainment slate.)

He greeted an elderly schnauzer. The owner told Collins that the dog was named Pretzels, and added, "My partner loves your work." But mostly Collins was invisible. He passed three students, all looking at phones, and felt no inspirational spark. He passed the chapel at Rollins College, where he once interviewed Paul McCartney onstage.

"When I stepped out in front of



Billy Collins

the audience that night, there was this 1964-like screaming," Collins said. "Then people realized it was me, and it stopped abruptly."

In Collins's new book of very short poems, called "Musical Tables," one named "Oxymorons" lists "beach culture," "happy birthday," and "family fun." It's that dry humor which has helped make him a best-selling poet—another oxymoron.

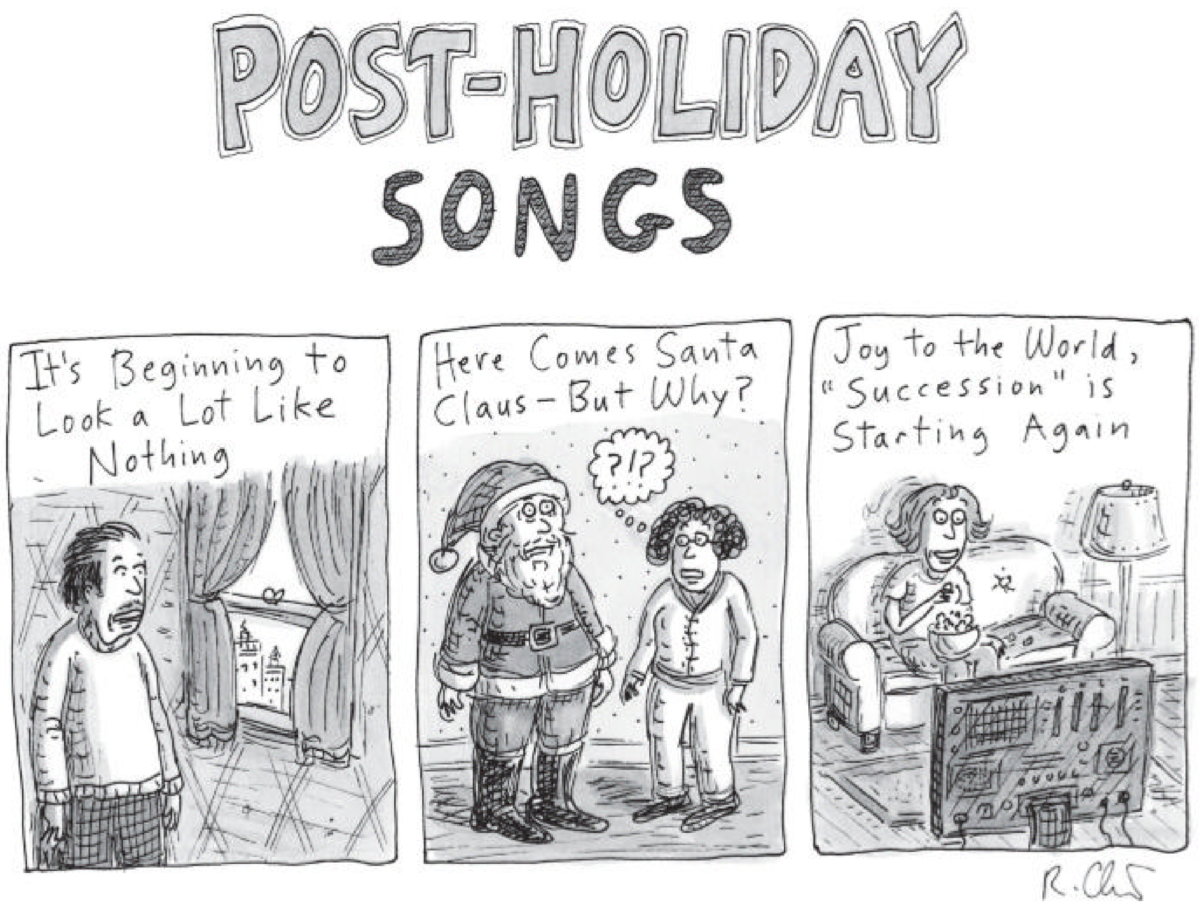
"My editor thought it was an interesting new direction in my artistic career," he said of his decision to fill a book with poems that are more or less haiku length. "But I feared it was the beginning of the end, with my poems getting shorter and shorter because I'm out of gas."

He sat on a bench and watched some students playing Wiffle ball on a quad. "You have to be interested in the playfulness of poetry to want to keep writing it," he said. Then, as if to shoo away the fatalism, he added that he has already written a hundred poems for his next collection, not all of them short. Settled into a second marriage, to Suzannah Gilman, a lawyer and a poet in her fifties, Collins now has two step-grandchildren, who call him Bee Bop; regular home-cooked meals; and two cats in the yard. More grandchildren are on the way, and he likes lying on the floor as they play around him. For a man who prefers Bugs Bunny to Mickey and Minnie Mouse ("married and too bourgeois"), he enjoys a quiet family life.

"A ray of sunshine and a free bench—what more can you ask?" he said, quoting Samuel Beckett as he crossed his long legs. More students passed, each on a phone or holding one. "They're afraid of being alone," he said. "But, if you can't be lost and alone, how can you find inspiration?"

After decades of teaching, most recently at City College, Collins is glad to avoid the politicized classroom. "Right now, people are ready to be offended," he said. "But I'm always ready to be delighted." The sun had set by the time he walked back to his modest house. "I'm a poet, so I can't afford to live right on the lake," he said. He plans on staying put in the summertime. "If you only have one house, you only need one toaster," he said. Then he went inside for dinner with his growing family.

—*Bob Morris*


POST-HOLIDAY SONGS
It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Nothing
Here Comes Santa Claus – But Why?
?!?
Joy to the World, "Succession" is Starting Again
R. Chast

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STOP THE PRESS
PERSONAL NEWS

Every week, at least two American newspapers cease publication—a major loss for readers seeking local scoops. Yet there remain some plucky holdouts. The other day, Jennifer Mills, the editor-in-chief (and only employee) of *Jennifer Mills News*, prepared to commemorate twenty-one years of her periodical with an exhibit at the Brick Aux gallery, in Williamsburg, on view through March 19th. Mills—who is also a writer and producer for the NPR news-quiz program "Wait Wait . . . Don't Tell Me!"—was taping more than two decades' worth of single-page editions of *J.M.N.* to the gallery walls.

"I used up two toner cartridges for this," she noted, proudly. "And I went through a full ream of paper."

The thirty-eight-year-old newspaperwoman—who wore a gray sweatshirt, jeans, and green-and-orange Nikes, and had her hair in a messy bun—gestured to a page at the top of the grid.

"That's issue one," she said. The dateline read September 13, 2002. "I remember writing it in my high-school computer lab. I don't know where it came from—I think I had, like, twenty minutes before class." The lead story was headlined "Breakfast News": "This morning Jennifer awoke wondering what to have for breakfast. Mills, 17 a resident of Shoreview decided on a crannberry-orange [sic] bagel. Disaster struck when unknowingly to her the heat intensity on the toaster was set to 4 instead of her usual 3."

Mills initially printed eleven copies and distributed them to her teachers, friends, and family, and found herself hooked. "Even, like, volume two I remember thinking, What if I did this for twenty years?" Now she publishes, on average, one issue per week; her longest break in publication was between May 25, 2012, and September 17, 2014. (She blames her first real job.)

But where could a rookie set up her newsroom? "At the beginning, anywhere that had free printing privileges," she said. "So, the college computer lab at night." She taped *J.M.N.* up in bathroom stalls. Soon, she was e-mailing new issues as Word documents to a rapidly growing readership. One subscriber eventually taught her how to make a PDF; now all issues can be found on her Tumblr.

Mills strolled around the gallery, reviewing early articles: "Girl Thinks Spring Break is good and Bad" (2003), "Girl Inhales snowflake" (2004), "Girl Wears Pants That Don't Fit" (2008).

"If you look at how densely written these are—young people overwrite!" she said. "You think you're so funny, everything is so important, you can't leave anything out. The spacing and the font size have definitely grown over the years, not out of laziness but out of discretion." Mills composes each issue in less than forty-five minutes and does a single copy read. (Her elementary school enrolled her in an "experimental spelling program," from which she's never recovered.)

She moved along the wall. "I'm twenty-five here and I'm still calling myself 'girl,'" she pointed out. In 2011, her father gently suggested that it might be time to make the switch to "woman."

"Woman Finds Hardboiled Egg in Purse," Mills read. "*That* day I remember—it had been in there for some time." She went on, "There's a lot of egg news, I guess—'Woman Wonders About Eggs.' I think I was wondering if they were expired." Also, still relevant: "Woman Pays a Premium for Egg."

There have been only a few banner headlines throughout the decades—one from when Mills found an extra closet that had been painted over in her studio apartment. "That was a real outlier," she explained. "I feel like that was the one time I reported actual news." Another banner day was March 26, 2009, when Mills broke the story "GIRL GETS INTERNET." (She'd previously had to go to the library for Wi-Fi.)

Most of the time, though, Mills covers such topics as finishing a bottle of lotion, or deciding that she doesn't like seltzer, or waiting for an underwear delivery. "Somehow I have a record of the things you're supposed to forget," she said. "There are probably so many things in my life that it would be really wonderful to remember that I didn't catalogue."

Mills did not invent the personal-news paper. Notably, a young Virginia Woolf and her siblings produced issues of the *Hyde Park Gate News*, which once reported that "Master Adrian Stephen was much disappointed" that he would not be able to sail to the lighthouse.

Unlike with the *Hyde Park Gate News*, however, "nobody but me ever appears in *Jennifer Mills News*," Mills said. "Which is kind of nice, because if something shitty happens to me there's this moment where it's, like, Oh, thank God, I can use this. I spilled a whole Crock-pot full of stew. It was the worst, grossest thing ever. And there was just this feeling of relief—like, at least I won't have to think of a story."

—*Emma Allen*

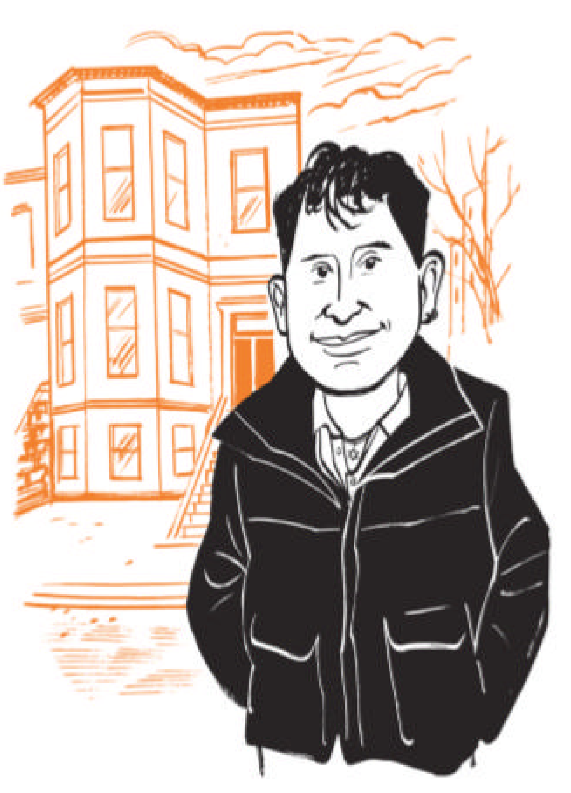
THE BOARDS
CONNECTIONS

Say what you want about neo-Nazis, but you can't accuse them of failing to keep up with the latest doings on Broadway. Last month, a small skinhead contingent showed up at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre to protest the first preview of "Parade," which tells the story of Leo Frank, a Jewish pencil-factory manager in Georgia who in 1913 was wrongfully convicted of, and later lynched for, raping and murdering a white girl. "They're not there anymore!" Ben Platt, who plays Frank, said the other day. Platt hadn't expected Nazis, but he had expected some hate. He'd prepared for the show's heaviness by painting his dressing room pink. "I figured it should be a brighter space," he said. "I also just love 'The Wizard of Oz' and Glinda."

Platt was in Brooklyn, having sneaked out of rehearsals for a research trip to Frank's childhood homes. He wore a North Face jacket and baggy jeans, with a Star of David necklace. A car had deposited him at an apartment building in Clinton Hill, where Frank had lived after graduating from the Pratt Institute, around the corner, back when it had a high school. "There's so many weird connections," Platt said. "My fiancé's uncle"—he'd recently proposed to the actor Noah Galvin—"is Mike Pratt, and he comes from the whole Pratt clan." He smiled. "Pratt and Platt."

Platt set a course toward the Frank family house in Prospect Heights. The production was in the previews slog (all-day rehearsals, then the show itself, for a month). Platt was subsisting on takeout and "Dance Moms." He spoke with a pleasant calmness, like someone who'd just taken a nice nap, and walked with a slow shuffle. A stroll. He took occasional swigs from a gallon-size water bottle, the same kind that his co-star, Micaela Diamond, lugs around, with motivational sayings printed on the side: "11 A.M.—REMEMBER YOUR GOAL," "5 P.M.—NEVER SAY NEVER." "It's so lame," he said. "But I don't remember to drink."

"Parade" is Platt's first Broadway show since he won a Tony as the star of "Dear Evan Hansen." Playing Frank is less taxing physically but more fraught personally. "The trauma involved in this one has a lot more to do with me," he said. Frank was twenty-nine when he was charged with murder. Platt is twenty-nine. As an adult, Frank had moved to Atlanta, an odd place for a prewar Jew. "My mom's side ended up in Kansas," Platt said. "They were one of very few Jewish families. There was a synagogue that's now been renamed for my grandma." The show has made him want to become a family-tree guy. "Both sides were randomly Latvian," he said. He's already learned that Josh Groban is a relative. "We're distant cousins! We share some great-aunt—Irene Groban. She's still alive!" The two men met in 2017, when Platt was in "Evan Hansen" and Groban was starring in "Natasha, Pierre & the Great



Ben Platt

Comet of 1812," at the theatre next door.

The Platts eventually made their way to Los Angeles. Ben went to Harvard-Westlake for school, Ojai for Jewish sleepaway camp. "I had a musical-theatre-themed bar mitzvah," he said. "My entrance to the party was 'Walk Like a Man' by the Four Seasons. I sang with my two brothers and my dad. We wore matching blazers, and we had some choreo that my sister did." His father, Marc Platt, a movie, TV, and theatre producer ("Legally Blonde," "La La Land," "Wicked"; the family dog was named Dorothy), was in charge of the photo montage. "He takes it very seriously. With each progressive kid, they became a little more directed. Mine was really beautiful to the point where I was sobbing afterwards, and all my friends were really uncomfortable. It was like watching a retrospective of your life like you're at the Kennedy Center, but you're thirteen."

On he strolled, in the sidewalk slow lane. An elderly woman with a cane trundled past. At last, he arrived at a brownstone with chalk hearts scrawled up the stoop. Platt recognized it from photographs. (He keeps one of Frank and his wife, Lucille, in the pink dressing room.) "It looks the same," he said. "The door is the same, these railings are the same." Another link: "There's this girl in our ensemble who's amazing—her name is Florrie Bagel. Jewish, as you can imagine. She's really into the, like, spiritual connection of everything. She came on a day off to this address and left a note and some flowers." Platt then got a call from his friend Jeff Levin, who'd worked on Platt's two studio albums; Levin's sister had just found a note outside her house. Frank's home was her home. "She had no idea," Platt said. "I figured—based on Jewish geography, and, just, New York—maybe I'd find some connection to the person there. But it was like an hour later."

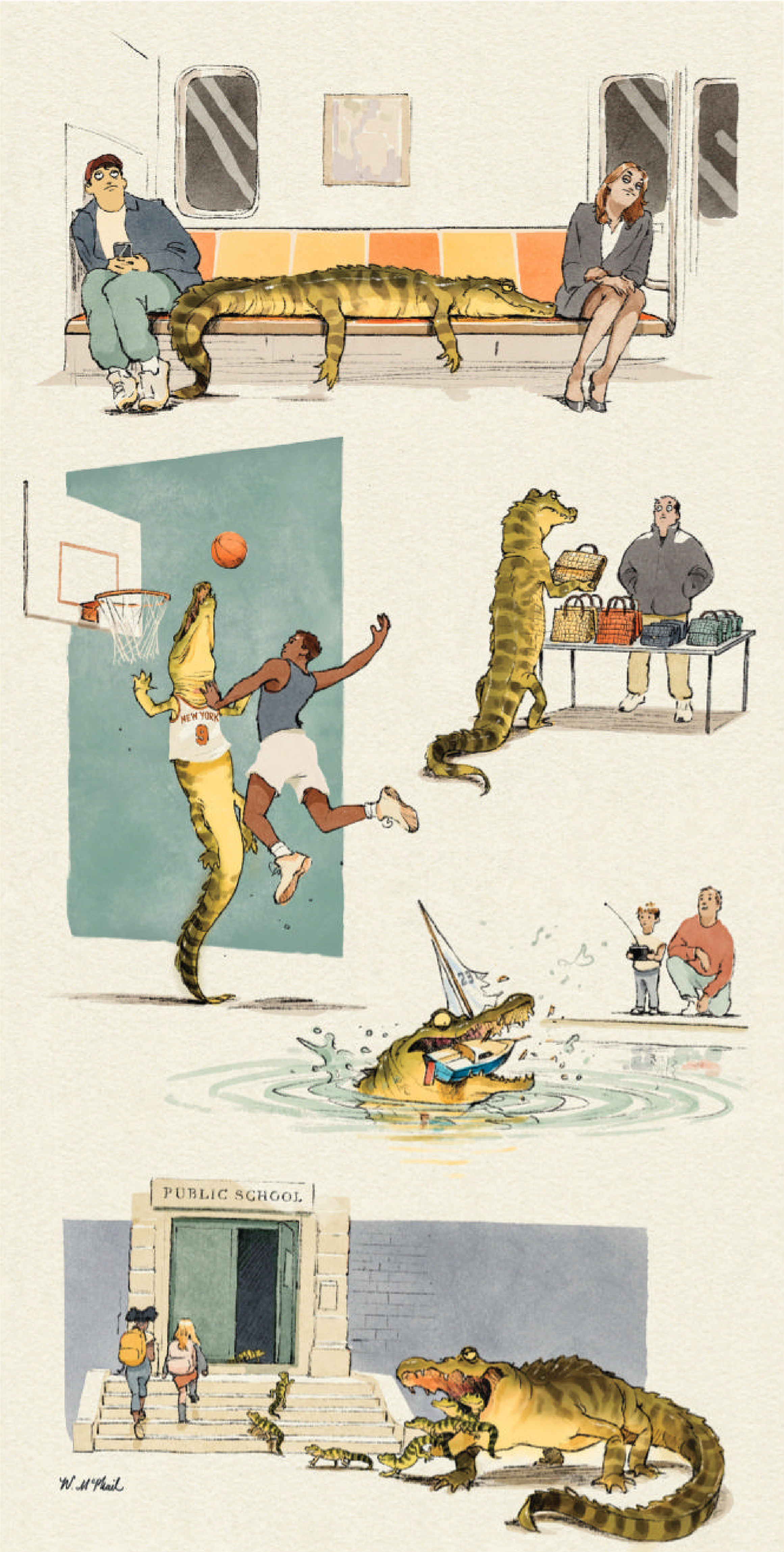
Platt also planned to get in touch. He regretted not doing so sooner. "I need to find somewhere to pee," he said. "I can also do it in an alley!" He looked at his water bottle, now down somewhere near "1 P.M.—COME ON," and added, "The worst part is, I sit onstage during intermission. More often than not, I have to pee. I'm trying to get more Zen about my bladder."

—*Zach Helfand*

SKETCHPAD BY WILL McPHAIL

MEET THE GATORS OF N.Y.C.

"An emaciated alligator found in Prospect Park . . . was the latest in a long line of saw-toothed reptiles found all over New York City."—The Times



THE WAYWARD PRESS

VILLAGEGATE

At a downtown paper, a fight over succession—and Sarah Jessica Parker.

BY ZACH HELFAND

West View News
New West View News

For sixty years, the residents of Charles Street, in Greenwich Village, have known that if they're in trouble, or if they want to find some, the guy to call is their neighbor George Capsis. Capsis, who is ninety-five, with white hair and the annoyed bearing of a man whose waiter is taking too long, is the publisher of the monthly newspaper the *WestView News*. *WestView's* constituency skews old—the types of neighborhood holdouts who might grumble that they moved to the Village for Dawn Powell and Balducci's and ended up with Marc Jacobs and "Sex and the City" bus tours. Over the years, the paper, which was founded in 2004 and has approached a circulation of twelve thousand, has fought against change in the neighborhood and its attendant problems: high rents, elder abuse, will tampering, greedy landlords.

It's also a juicy read. Subscribers will recall the times when Capsis recorded his habit of slapping public officials across the face. There was the cop who'd blocked the bike lane ("He personified the arrogance of arbitrary power"), the state senator at a rally against a hospital closure ("If you bring him here I'll hit him again"), and the intern working the rally ("To my astonishment, he began to cry like a girl"). In the manner of a small-town chronicler, Capsis refers to friends and villains in print by first name only. Lately, there have been a lot of villains. Capsis believes he has been the target of a succession plot, like Logan Roy without the Gulfstreams. Which is why readers have been hearing so much about Arthur.

The WestView News coup mirrors the old battle for the soul of the Village itself.

Arthur Schwartz, who is seventy, crossed paths with Capsis eleven years ago, during a fight over a proposal to build apartments on Pier 40. Schwartz was for. Capsis was against. They became fast friends. Schwartz, a public-advocacy attorney and a local Democratic Party functionary, was a fellow Village longtimer. Every old hand has a real-estate story; Schwartz's is that he sold his Eleventh Street town house at a twenty-million-dollar profit. (He used the money to buy a place on Twelfth.) The pair shared a Jane Jacobs-ish bent and a willingness to provoke. In the seventies, Schwartz once confronted Mayor Abe Beame with fake blood spurting out of his shirt, yelling that the city's hospital closures were killing him. Naturally, he began writing for *WestView*.

"George and Arthur were like Batman and Robin," a former contributor told me recently. Someone would call Capsis with a problem. Capsis would call Schwartz. They'd trumpet their victories in the paper: the banishment of a neighborhood squatter dubbed the West Village Grifter ("THE GRIFTER IS GONE"), justice for a ninety-seven-year-old Latvian dancer named Vija who'd been the victim of a Social Security scam ("VIJA SAVED"). Schwartz, through his political connections—he was once a lawyer for Bernie Sanders—got public officials to pay their respects to Capsis. He met Sanders. Bill de Blasio visited twice. "I got up and put my arm around him as he sat and said, 'you're the same age as my son,'" Capsis wrote. Capsis, in turn, allowed Schwartz to promote his own election campaigns and his legal services. He became a *WestView* fixture, as writer, general counsel, and subject ("ARTHUR SCHWARTZ NAMED DEPUTY GRAND MARSHALL OF THE VILLAGE HALLOWEEN PARADE!"). He represented Capsis in the slapping affairs. When Schwartz had a heart attack, Capsis published breathless bulletins on his condition. Schwartz was there through the paper's heyday, when it was an important voice protesting the razing of St. Vincent's Hospital and working to convert a church into a community concert

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER ARKLE

hall. De Blasio recalled his visits with Capsis and "his quote unquote editorial board" as "a hoot." He told me, "The personalities were fascinating, and the intention and what felt like the purity of their cause was fascinating."

One reason the partnership worked was that Schwartz didn't expect compensation. Like a lot of elderly Villagers, Capsis was wealthy in the sense of landholdings—he bought his house in 1961, for forty-six thousand dollars—but less so in the sense of liquidity. *WestView* had cash-flow problems. One acquaintance recalled, "George told me when he started the paper that his model is to not pay the writers, and to pay the production staff as little as possible." Most regulars didn't seem to mind. Through years of shared enterprise, over meetings in Capsis's back garden, a community formed. Keith Michael wrote about bird-watching. Brian Pape had the architecture column. Maggie Berkvist, a former *Times* photo editor, did the same job for *WestView*. Nat Hentoff, a well-known *Village Voice* columnist, sometimes contributed. Staffers often had to navigate Capsis's temper. Most had been fired and rehired several times, and Capsis often threatened more slapping. But they could live with that, too; many were over eighty and looking for enlivenment. "I was retired," Kim Plosia, the paper's longtime creative director, told me recently. "I was bored!"

If you were a neighborhood newcomer, the provincial world that *WestView* portrayed, or created, was essentially what you were buying into when you purchased your renovated brownstone. The paper offered a link to an older, beatnik-tinged Village. De Blasio told me, "Capsis was very, very much of the mind-set that they had something precious and communal and Old New York that needed to be protected." Capsis wrote of hearing Dylan Thomas recite poetry at the White Horse Tavern. Capsis's house was the former home of Sinclair Lewis, and he liked to recount bitchy disputes between Lewis and his bohemian contemporaries. (Capsis also insists that Lewis popularized the term "brunch.") If the neighborhood's folkie appeal had long ago devoured itself, *WestView* offered a Disneyland version for the late arrivers. Sarah Jessica Parker befriended Capsis and became a *WestView* booster; she'd helped arrange the first de Blasio meeting. Capsis considered the endorsement to be perhaps his greatest honor ("SARAH JESSICA PARKER ENDORSES WESTVIEW NEWS"). His door was rarely locked, and visitors—Parker included—appeared constantly. But nothing caused as much of a stir as the news that landed on Charles Street in December.

One morning, early in the month, someone brought Capsis a newspaper. It looked like *WestView*, but it wasn't. The logo was an exact copy, with one additional word: *New WestView News*. The masthead included familiar names: Brian, Maggie, Kim. Atop it, listed as senior editor, was Arthur Schwartz. Someone had left a copy on the stoop of Sarah Jessica Parker's double-wide town house. She took to Instagram to post a new endorsement. "This is the way I stay informed about my community in NYC. @westviewnews (The New!)" Capsis was dumbfounded. The next issue of his paper declared, "SCHWARTZ ATTEMPTING TO STEAL WESTVIEW NEWS FROM CAPSIS."

New York is a city of neighborhoods, and each has its own paper. *Bowery Boogie*, *Rockaway Times*, *Norwood News*, *Canarsie Courier*. Amid the larger forces of homogenization, the community rag remains a stubborn fixture. The city has a hundred and sixteen of them—your foreign-language *Der Yid* and ethnic *Haitian Times* and fully digital WeHeartAstoria.com—and that doesn't include dozens of newsletters, zines, and shoppers. The city's first paper, the *New-York Gazette*, which published out of Pearl Street, carried the kind of local gossip that wouldn't seem out of place in *WestView*. One 1733 issue reported that Elizabeth, wife of John Lawrence, had eloped but was continuing to charge goods to her husband's account. Now, as then, the papers tend to be vehicles for ads for hyper-local periodontists and shoe-repair joints, but they bestow upon the bodega browser a sense of belonging to a particular place, even as foreign investors buy up the condos, and the mom-and-pop shops leave for Nassau County.

On the front page of the *New WestView News*, the defectors published a manifesto expressing their fealty to the neighborhood. Regarding the split, they were tantalizingly light on details. They praised Capsis's long stewardship of the paper but hinted at problems. "As George got older he started to allow his caregiver to have more of an active role," they wrote. "The entire staff quit."

A week after the coup, I met Schwartz in the back of a bagel shop on Sixth Avenue. He wore jeans and a button-down, his thinning hair balanced by a patchy beard. He spoke with calm detachment. "It's a very odd story," he said. He explained that the trouble started seven years ago, when Capsis received a visit from an aspiring contributor. "She shows up at his door like Mary Poppins and says, 'I'm here to take care of you,'" Schwartz said. "Her name was Dusty Berke." This was the caregiver in question. Why had she come? "It's the mystery of all time," Schwartz said.

Berke, who is sixty-one, had visited, ostensibly, to pitch a story. But she intuited that Capsis, who was approaching ninety, needed her help.

"The voice that guides me said, 'This is where you belong,'" Berke recalled to me recently. Capsis eventually offered her a free apartment upstairs; she helped around the house. Some *WestView* contributors were suspicious. Berke wanted to write for the paper, and her story ideas were strange. She seemed particularly keen, for instance, on reëxamining how, exactly, the World Trade Center had collapsed. The staff usually blocked her, but she kept pushing. A onetime columnist told me, "When I met her, she explained that she wanted to look after George, and that she wanted the paper."

As time went on, Schwartz said, "she started interfering more and more. And George started declining more and more. She answered all his calls. She responded to all his e-mails. And she started installing people to write in the paper."

There were concerns that she was after more than just *WestView*. A couple of years ago, she moved into Capsis's own apartment, on the ground floor, although she kept her belongings, including closetfuls of designer clothes, upstairs. A person who has lived in the building told me, "She sort of exists in the brownstone, lady-of-the-manor style." Berke started collecting rent from the other six units, and opening the building to itinerant friends. "Really cheesy people who clearly had, like, mental-health problems," Schwartz said. (The tenant said, "There have been, like, five different random guests, friends of hers, that sleep in the parlor.") Berke told one *WestView* contributor, "I'll be the landlord one day."

Staffers speak of Berke as coming out of nowhere, but she'd lived on the block before. After an unsettled childhood in California, she found work as an interior designer and married a wealthy party planner who had a house on Charles Street, a few doors down from Capsis's. The brownstone, Berke told me, had a swimming pool, a batting cage, and split-level gardens. "Living in the Village was like living in the country," she said.

Capsis didn't know her, but she, of course, knew of Capsis. He'd lived his whole life in Manhattan. At P.S. 192, he was the *Times'* student rep, selling newspapers to classmates for three cents. His father made a living setting up Greek immigrants with restaurants; he'd front the down payments. In the sixties, Capsis moved to the Village (a friend of a friend had loaned him his down payment), where he soon started the Charles Street Block Association, which planted trees and planned get-togethers. The group published a newsletter, which became a regular pamphlet; in 2004, Capsis turned it into *WestView*. When Berke and her husband divorced, a decade ago (they'd had a disagreement over his children using toothpaste that contained fluoride), Berke had to move out of the neighborhood. *WestView* was her connection.

Last fall, Berke was finally installed as *WestView's* managing editor. The resulting issue, for November, 2022, was unusual. Some of its contents had little relevance to the Village. The above-the-fold front-page story was about "The Wall Street Conspiracy," a documentary from 2012 on naked short selling. An article about 5G poles noted, "A few people who may be electromagnetically sensitive (EMS), say they notice a tingling and queasy feeling if they linger near them."

According to Schwartz, the staff approached him in crisis. "They said, 'Can you do something? Don't you have some kind of agreement with George that you can take over if he's incompetent?'" Long story. In 2013, during one of *WestView's* liquidity crunches, Capsis had asked Schwartz for a lifeline. They signed a contract in which Schwartz agreed to provide thirty thousand dollars, paid back in advertisements for his law firm and political campaigns, in exchange for one per cent of the newspaper. The paper's three-million-dollar valuation was, perhaps, secondary to another part of the deal: Schwartz would have the right to succeed Capsis in the event of his death or a loss of faculties.

Schwartz says he never sought to take over *WestView*. As he explained recently in a letter to Capsis's lawyer, "I have a busy law practice, a marriage I spend time on, a daughter in college, a daughter about to go to college, play a major role in the Democratic Party (I am the District Leader in the Village and the Manhattan Democratic Party Law Chair, and represent numerous candidates running for office), help care for my 100 year old mother, play an important role in the complex lives of my 32 and 35 year-old children." He went on, "I really had no desire to add Westview News into my life." Still, he felt compelled. He and the staff began plotting in secret.

Schwartz allowed that he felt bad for Capsis. He'd heard that an ambulance had shown up not long after the defection. As for Sarah Jessica Parker, he said he'd had nothing to do with her apparent endorsement. "If I talked to Sarah Jessica Parker, it wouldn't be about that," he said. Yet Schwartz viewed the new paper as more homage than ripoff. "We took over the spirit of it," he said. "And maybe for the first issue we took over the name of it."

Capsis doesn't see it that way. When I visited him, in his cramped ground-floor apartment, which has old copies of the paper stacked to the ceilings and a musty odor of neglect, he was enraged. "Suppose you, in your advanced age, had a newspaper that Sarah Jessica Parker praised as the best newspaper in the Village," he said. "And Arthur Schwartz copies it. Copies it! It is the most despicable." The scandal had captivated a subset of the neighborhood. The *Village Sun*, another local paper, had been running wall-to-wall coverage. Capsis told me that the ambulance rumors were true. (Berke had thought he was having a heart attack.) He fantasized about the paramedics returning, only not for him: "If Arthur Schwartz were to walk in here right now, I would slap him!"

Capsis and Schwartz agreed on one central point: the staff exodus was about Berke. "When they saw her name as the editor, they blew up!" Capsis said. But Schwartz, he believed, was using Berke as cover for a long-plotted takeover. Documents were produced.

The 2013 loan agreement had soured their friendship. Capsis thought Schwartz was trying to force him out. A few years ago, Schwartz began insinuating, in e-mails to the staff, that Capsis was mentally incompetent. "Dementia does funny things," he wrote in 2018. At other times, Schwartz tried flattery. "Do you have some other plan for Westview when you pass?" he wrote. "Who else would be better equipped?" At one point, Capsis refused to publish Schwartz in the paper unless he voided the agreement. Schwartz relented and nullified the contract.

As Capsis and I talked, Berke, who has long brown hair and wears lots of gold jewelry, like a Malibu matron, would often cut him off or answer for him. Capsis would send her out of the room on various pretexts—to make him toast, to check on a cable guy. "Dusty likes this situation because it gives her control," Capsis told me, while Berke was preoccupied. "She feeds on chaos. I have to be careful what I say. Dusty believes in the conspiracy theory." I asked which one. He mouthed, "All."

Berke overheard. "But what if it was a conspiracy theory that was hiding the real conspiracy?" she shouted. She went on a long rant, about vaccines, about a gonorrhea treatment called Argyrol that she'd used to treat Capsis when he got COVID, about the 2020 election (she said it was rigged), about September 11th. ("I never said that hologram planes hit the World Trade Center," she clarified. "I only say Building Seven.") She showed me a scale model of the Trade Center site that she keeps in the house.

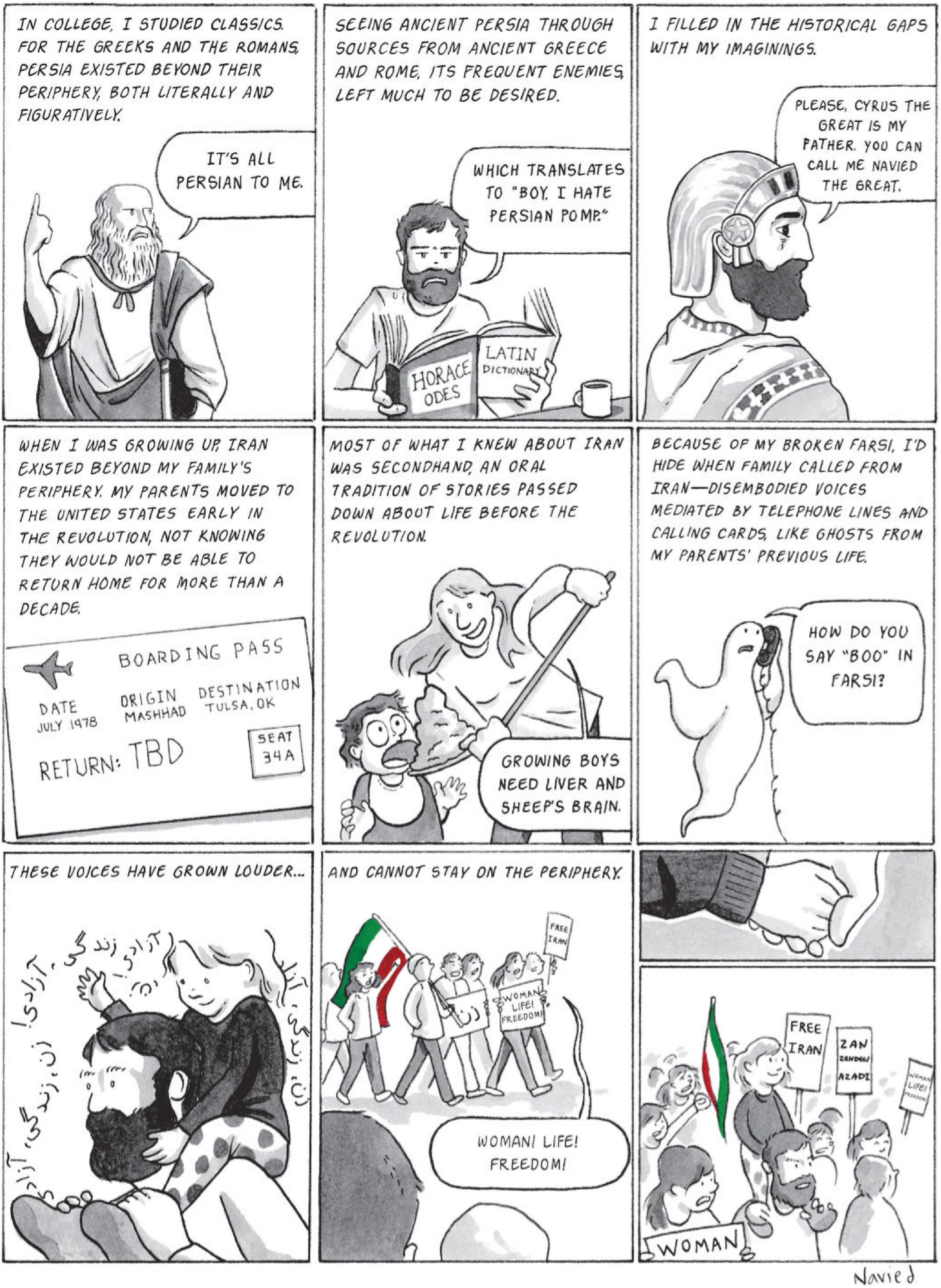
Capsis, with growing irritation, interrupted. "Dusty, could you warm up my coffee?" he yelled. He turned to me and whispered, "You could see why a lot of people dislike her."

She heard again and came rushing back.

"See!" Capsis said.

When she was finally out of earshot, Capsis seized my arm and leaned close, his face twisted in rage. "She won't let me

SKETCHBOOK BY NAVIED MAHDAVIAN


IN COLLEGE, I STUDIED CLASSICS. FOR THE GREEKS AND THE ROMANS, PERSIA EXISTED BEYOND THEIR PERIPHERY, BOTH LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY.
IT'S ALL PERSIAN TO ME.
SEEING ANCIENT PERSIA THROUGH SOURCES FROM ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME, ITS FREQUENT ENEMIES, LEFT MUCH TO BE DESIRED.
WHICH TRANSLATES TO "BOY, I HATE PERSIAN POMP."
HORACE ODES
LATIN DICTIONARY
I FILLED IN THE HISTORICAL GAPS WITH MY IMAGININGS.
PLEASE, CYRUS THE GREAT IS MY FATHER. YOU CAN CALL ME NAVIED THE GREAT.
WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, IRAN EXISTED BEYOND MY FAMILY'S PERIPHERY. MY PARENTS MOVED TO THE UNITED STATES EARLY IN THE REVOLUTION, NOT KNOWING THEY WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO RETURN HOME FOR MORE THAN A DECADE.
BOARDING PASS
DATE JULY 1978
ORIGIN MASHHAD
DESTINATION TULSA, OK
RETURN: TBD
SEAT 34A
MOST OF WHAT I KNEW ABOUT IRAN WAS SECONDHAND, AN ORAL TRADITION OF STORIES PASSED DOWN ABOUT LIFE BEFORE THE REVOLUTION.
GROWING BOYS NEED LIVER AND SHEEP'S BRAIN.
BECAUSE OF MY BROKEN FARSI, I'D HIDE WHEN FAMILY CALLED FROM IRAN—DISEMBODIED VOICES MEDIATED BY TELEPHONE LINES AND CALLING CARDS, LIKE GHOSTS FROM MY PARENTS' PREVIOUS LIFE.
HOW DO YOU SAY "BOO" IN FARSI?
THESE VOICES HAVE GROWN LOUDER...
زن، زندگی، آزادی! زن، زندگی، آزادی! زن، زندگی، آزادی! زن، زندگی، آزا
AND CANNOT STAY ON THE PERIPHERY.
FREE IRAN
زن
WOMAN LIFE! FREEDOM!
WOMAN! LIFE! FREEDOM!
FREE IRAN
ZAN ZENDEGI AZADI
WOMAN LIFE! FREEDOM
WOMAN
Navied

talk!" he whispered. "You'll have to come and see me alone." I asked when. "Getting rid of her is the problem," he said.

Among those who have remained loyal to Capsis, there is a concern that the paper war with Schwartz, and whatever is going on with Berke, might be dangerous for a ninety-five-year-old's health. There's another faction that wonders whether the fuss is keeping him alive.

The conflict over *WestView's* future was easily foreseeable. "A lot of people have been talking about succession for a long time," a contributor told me. Capsis would dangle ownership rights, to Schwartz sometimes, to Berke at other times. Later, he'd act as if the conversations had never happened.

Other suitors materialized. Berke had a rich friend in Florida who was purportedly interested in buying the paper. A *WestView* hanger-on named Alan Silverstein, who describes himself as an entrepreneur ("I was involved with the bottled-water company that did Trump's water bottles," he told me), discussed a potential deal. Capsis occasionally floated the heir-apparent designation to others: to Lincoln Anderson, the publisher of the *Village Sun;* to Karen Rempel, the author of a fashion column called "Karen's Quirky Style." "He said he didn't want Dusty to have it, he didn't want Arthur to have it," Rempel told me. "I decided that it would just be too much hassle." To another regular columnist, Capsis confided that his intention was for the paper to die with him.

One thing no one understands is why he'd put himself in such a vulnerable position with Berke. There are theories. "Apparently, Dusty sleeps in George's bed," Schwartz told me. Berke chafed at the insinuation. "You see George," she said. "There's a reason that I sleep in his room."

One obvious appeal was the free labor. Few deny that Berke provides attentive, almost obsessive care, even if she can be manipulative, with a worrisome distrust of modern pharmaceuticals. "No question, she's a great help," Capsis acknowledged to me one day. He pointed out that it's not so easy to find a live-in nurse. Good ones, anyway, typically like to be compensated in cash. Berke denied that she was trying to assume ownership of the town house, but she seemed desperate to keep a place in the Village. To Capsis's son and daughter, who stand to inherit the building, she proposed a deal: they let her continue to live in Capsis's apartment rent-free until she is sufficiently remunerated for her hours spent caretaking. His kids—his son is a physical-education administrator in Long Island, and his daughter is a software engineer in Rhode Island—aren't interested. "I'm fully prepared to go to court to file an eviction proceeding if she won't leave," his daughter told me. "If my father changes his will, that's my father's business."

Capsis's complaints about Berke's domineering behavior were more concerning. (Berke said that Capsis "is not under my thumb.") Acquaintances have offered to find other home-care options; Capsis has turned them down. At some level, it seems, the drama is the point.

Perhaps it is also why so many have schemed to take over a money-losing local newspaper, and why so many followed its coverage and, later, its apparent theft. For Villagers, *WestView* provided a bit of friction in a neighborhood whose bustling tenements have been replaced by single-family mansions, and where life has become largely frictionless. One day, Capsis noted to me that the block has become eerily quiet. Some weekends, it seems that all the residents have left town for their vacation homes. The *WestView* saga, at least, gave its participants something to talk about. The squabbles, rumors, and side-taking enacted something like a community.

I tried, over a series of weeks, to ask Capsis about his succession plan. He refused to answer. "It's not in my will," he said. "It's not written down by a lawyer." In the meantime, he intended to continue publishing. "A good newspaperman requires straight thinking, valid goals, and courage," he said. "When you get to be my age, what is there left but courage?"

There are now three community papers in the Village—four if you count the *Villager*, a once robust outlet now publishing in diminished form. (Edward Hopper was a reader.) The *Village Sun* continued its coverage of the coup. One article described a trollish phone call placed by Schwartz's hundred-year-old mother, Roselind, to Capsis, inquiring if he was still in business and, if not, what would happen to her subscription fee. Capsis later played me a recording of the call:

CAPSIS: Your son is a liar. And he's a cheat. . . . And I am going to do everything I can to see that he is injured, legally, for what he has done.

ROSELIND: I just want to know whether my twenty-four dollars is still paying for the paper.

CAPSIS: Why don't you ask Arthur?! He owns it, he says! And he's a *liar!!*

Schwartz's paper, which rebranded itself *VillageView*, to avoid trademark problems (Capsis had sent a cease-and-desist letter), soldiered on, with articles on a nurse's strike and subway elevators and flattering notes about Schwartz's legal work. It now has a circulation of ten thousand. *WestView*, after a delay owing to the staff exodus, reëmerged with a bizarre issue that included a rant extolling the entrepreneurial spirit of the United Arab Emirates, a review of the Hopper exhibit at the Whitney, and, for reasons that were unclear, a first-person account of a Theta Chi fraternity reunion at Long Beach State, in California. A fund-raiser ad urged readers "To Help George grow *WestView News* and bring back Arts, Culture, Music and the Bohemian Spirit that made the Village what it is Today."

Longtime contributors and acquaintances expressed sadness over the whole situation. Many were sympathetic to Capsis but ideologically aligned with Schwartz. All felt that they had to choose sides. Only Keith Michael, the bird columnist, managed to write for both—owls for Capsis, ducks for Schwartz. The two men aren't speaking, although Capsis once accidentally copied Schwartz on an e-mail. Schwartz replied, "You really pissed off my mother!" Then he made a peace offering. "*Don't let Dusty Answer*," he wrote. "You become what we will call Executive Editor of the New Westview." Schwartz would remain as publisher: "You get the glory. I get the headaches." Capsis never responded.

The last time I visited Capsis, I asked, once more, what he wanted to happen to the paper.

He considered for a moment. "Dusty asked me for the paper," he said. "My kids don't want the paper. It's a lot of work. She deserves it. So, I give her the paper." He smirked. "How about that!"

I wondered how he'd make sure it passed to Berke. Would he name her publisher? Would he make a provision in his will? There would be no such legalities, he said. He preferred to leave it as an agreement between friends. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

HOW TO TELL IF YOU'RE IN A TV SHOW

BY EMMA RATHBONE

As someone who writes for TV but lives in the real world, I've compiled a handy guide:

CONVENIENT INTERRUPTIONS

In television, a conversation is always getting conveniently interrupted right after all the pertinent information has been conveyed. Two characters will have a pivotal moment, and then someone else will bust in, or the telephone will ring. In life, no one ever comes and interrupts my conversations when they get boring. Nope, I'm still just standing there, with my heavy plate of potato salad, making small talk, eking it out of whole stone.

SEX

In TV, people are always sneaking out in the morning after having sex, sometimes even leaving a note on the sex partner's pillow. In life, there's no way you wouldn't hear that person leaving. First of all, you'd already be awake, because you stayed up all night wondering what the hell just happened. Second, even if you were asleep, you're not going to hear when someone's rustling around in your room looking for a pen among your giant pile of DVDs? And your shelves full of DVDs? And also your wooden bowl full of loose DVDs??

TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING WHEN IT'S REALLY ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE

In TV shows, people often talk about something that's really about something else. Like, a soccer mom will get up and give a speech about soccer, but it's really about her divorce, and the disparity is used to comic effect. Has this ever happened in life, even one time? Actually, I take it back. My ninth-grade French teacher showed up in class one day and said that, when it came to learning vocabulary, life was "full of new adventures" and we should be "very open to them," but I'm pretty sure she was talking about the affair she was having with the principal, so I was clinging to the original meaning for dear life.

TONE

In TV, there is supposed to be a consistent tone. Either you're in "Sex and the City," gliding through a shoal of puns and relatable problems, or you're shitting yourself with anxiety in the sickly morning light of a show like "The Wire" (haven't seen it). In life, the tone of your day can change on a dime. Even in just the span of a phone call with your mom. One moment you're in a witty ensemble family comedy, and then your mom asks how your writing is going and you're in the desolate mists of "The Handmaid's Tale" (haven't seen it), and then you stub your toe and you're in a split-level-ranch-house comedy (not a real genre), and then you go downstairs and forgive someone under a burning roof and you're in "Grace Under Fire."

ROUSING SPEECHES

In television, you can often solve a problem by giving a rousing speech. There's an issue, a conflict, the world is going to end, what have you, and some intractable character who is blocking the solution will be swayed by a heartfelt, off-the-cuff lecture in which the pitch of the speaker's emotion will insure that some truth is crowbarred open. In life, this hardly ever works. I know from personal experience that most of the time your partners and friends are simply not up for these speeches. They don't care for them. Another reason this kind of thing doesn't work in life is that people actually do not like to change their minds in front of you. Which brings me to:

EPIPHANIES

In TV shows, people are always having epiphanies that herald some new way of moving forward or of being in the world that amounts to a solution to all their problems. In life, I have about a million epiphanies a day, like I should live in the moment/be more organized/be more grateful/go to the library to research pickleball/stop drinking so much wine/switch to wine coolers/just try warm wine. But the question is, do people really change? They often do in TV, but in life I think the jury is still out. Maybe only after someone has a million of these epiphanies on the same subject do they start to fuse into something resembling a better way to be. Like, you finally, finally forgive yourself for your terrible SAT scores while waiting in line at the market, and this time it sticks. But that's really hard to capture in a TV show. ♦

ONWARD AND UPWARD IN THE GARDEN

PAY DIRT

Leafing through the seed catalogues.

BY JILL LEPORE

★ STAR ★
COLLECTION
Scarlet Horn.
PLANT
BULBS
ETC.
New
•ASTERS•
RARE
FRUITS.
MAMMOTH•
SEEDS

Which is the beet of your dreams? The Johnny's Selected Seeds catalogue, out of Winslow, Maine, has the reliable if unexciting Zeppo—presumably named after the youngest of the Marx Brothers—which boasts "minimal root hairs." Unfortunately, Johnny's $5.50 packet is out of stock. Happily, you can still order five grams of Zeppo seeds for $4.35 from an outfit called Territorial Seeds, based in Oregon, by scribbling your beet deets on the order form in the back of its catalogue. Like most seed catalogues, the one from Botanical Interests, out of Colorado, sells the Detroit Dark Red ($2.69 for about a hundred seeds), "the standard for beets since 1892," the warhorse, a tastes-good-and-stores-well variety bred in Canada and first introduced, in the catalogue of Michigan's D. M. Ferry Seed Company, the year Grover Cleveland won back the White House. Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, of Missouri, prints a more-than-five-hundred-page Whole Earth Catalog-inspired Whole Seed Catalog, whose four glossy pages of beet varieties include not only the Detroit Dark Red ("deservedly the most popular all-purpose red beet") but a golden whose roots "do not bleed or stain"; a variety called Crosby's Egyptian, whose origins are actually German; a jicama look-alike called the Albino; a cylindrical red root from Denmark that resembles a fat, angry carrot; a ribboned heirloom from Italy which, when you cut it up, looks like peppermint candy; and a monster called the Mammoth Red mangel ($4.00 for two hundred and fifty seeds), also known as the mangel-wurzel, which can weigh up to forty pounds and which you can use either to feed your livestock or to play a medieval sport known as "mangold hurling." As near as I can tell, it's similar to shot put, except with something that looks like a rutabaga.

There are more than two hundred mail-order seed companies in the United States, and, if you've ever ordered from any of them, chances are that your mail has been swollen with catalogues, their covers of radicchio red, marigold yellow, and zinnia pink peeking out from beneath the annual drab-gray crop of tax documents and the daily, dreary drizzle of bills, solicitations, and credit-card offers. You can order seeds online, but, in midwinter, seed companies will mail you their printed catalogues all the same, casting a line through your mail slot and dropping into your vestibule so much bait on a hook, rainbow-colored fly-fishing lures for dark-water trout. I bite every time.

In wintry months, the catalogues sell the romance of sprouting, flowering, fruiting.

Seed and garden catalogues sell a magical, boozy, Jack-and-the-beanstalk promise: the coming of spring, the rapture of bloom, the fleshy, wet, watermelon-and-lemon tang of summer. Trade your last cow for a handful of beans to grow a beanstalk as high as the sky. They make strangely compelling reading, like a village mystery or the back of a cereal box. Also, you can buy seeds from them.

Some seed catalogues open with a photograph of the company's owners and a Dear Gardener annual update that can read like the family newsletters that used to come folded into Christmas cards. You find yourself happy to hear that someone has finished eighth grade and someone else has taken up sheepshearing, and highly relieved that most people seem to have come out of the pandemic still feeling the sun shine. "I have spent the last year battling and beating cancer and am entering 2023 with a renewed appreciation for life, and my returning health," Melissa at Pinetree Garden Seeds writes from New

ILLUSTRATION BY NOLAN PELLETIER

Gloucester, Maine. "Here in central Virginia, we had decent enough weather, and were actually a bit on the cool side, with heavy rain in August, in contrast to most other folks," the owners of Southern Exposure Seed Exchange report. "I survived competing at Nationals in the Olympic Triathalon 'old as dirt' division and swam a 3 mile open water event race," the owner of Bluestone Perennials writes from Madison, Ohio. "The whole family is now playing pickleball."

Inside, you'll find illustrations—usually photographs but sometimes Audubon-elegant drawings—accompanied, plant by plant, with stats and vitals. It's like reading the botanical version of a three-ring binder full of baseball cards, tucked into nine-a-page plastic sleeves. ("Mookie Betts, Los Angeles Dodgers. HT: 5'9". WT: 180. Bats Right, Throws Right. . . . Mookie's impact on Los Angeles was instant." As against: "Mignonette. Reseda odorata. A cottage garden favorite. . . . Height: 12" to 24". *Average seed life: 1 to 2 years*.") The people who write for seed catalogues are probably influenced by copy not just for baseball cards but for children's-toy catalogues and automobile-dealership Web sites—Botanical Interests sells a bean called the Ferrari, as "sleek and slim as a sports car!"—and yet the best of the horticultural hawkers have a feel for the material, and a furry, pussy-willow charm. High Mowing Organic Seeds, from Wolcott, Vermont, sells a Seychelles pole bean ($5.90 for a one-ounce packet), which it describes as "a prolific producer of perfect-quality, stringless pods with an archipelago of tender, small seeds inside each." An archipelago of seeds! Sow True Seed, out of Asheville, North Carolina, describes a tomato called the Hillbilly ($3.25 for fifty seeds) as having a yellow-and-crimson center that looks "like a stained-glass window"; it also advises that the rhubarb Victoria ($3.25 for seventy seeds) has a "hint of wine flavor," and explains that elephant garlic ($15.95 per half pound) is "really a type of bulbing leek instead of true garlic." Who knew?

Territorial Seeds describes a cucumber as "pickle-perfect," a sweet potato's flesh as "tie-dye," and a head of lettuce as featuring "nice puckering." At the other end of the beanpole, whoever writes for Botanical Interests confoundingly describes a cantaloupe as "grapefruit-sized," and is alarmingly fond of wordplay: "This pea keeps its cool but can also take the heat!," or, about the Golden Jubilee, "Oh, the jubilation you will feel with this dazzling golden-orange, award-winning tomato!" I'd rather grow that stained-glass-window one.

Not all garden catalogues sell seeds. Bluestone Perennials, my favorite nursery, sells tiny plants packed into plantable pots made of the hairs of a coconut shell, like a tropical cocktail. Their plants sound like tropical cocktails, too. The Morello is a deer-resistant, upright pink perennial ($15.95 each): "Whorls of tubular flowers climb the profuse burgundy rose, salvia-like spikes." Reading the Bluestone catalogue, for me, is like reading a menu where I don't understand any of the words but I'm sure my meal will be excellent. And, on the subject of eating, if you love to cook and are frustrated that you can't find certain ingredients in stores, specialty seed catalogues mean that you can always grow exactly what you need. Kitazawa Seed Company, out of Salt Lake City, has been selling seeds for vegetables and herbs used in a host of Asian cuisines since 1917, and offers, for instance, the Korean Cuisine Garden, which "features traditional Korean red peppers for making red chili paste (gochujang) and a Korean cabbage used for making kimchi" ($28.86, but currently out of stock).

The writing in these catalogues can, admittedly, be wacky: the lexicon for lushness easily tips into lewdness, especially for flowers but even for vegetables. Territorial Seeds, seemingly heedless of the emoji implications, describes an heirloom eggplant called the Listada de Gandia ($4.45 for an eighth of a gram of seeds) as a plant whose "elongated, egg-shaped fruits reach 8 inches long, have a delicately mild flavor and tender, thin skin that's streaked in violet and cream." Ahem.

The catalogue from Harris Seeds, founded in Rochester, New York, in 1879, is, like a lot of the older catalogues, plainspoken and practical. "Dark green heads are high quality with a smooth dome and a medium small head" (Asteroid broccoli, $4.99 for fifty seeds); "The 3-5 lb. blue-green, globe-shaped heads have a solid interior and hold well without splitting" (Blue Lagoon cabbage, $3.91 for fifty seeds); "Tender sweet kernels fill out the ear well, and are protected by a tight husk" (Kickoff corn, $11.15 for two hundred and fifty seeds). Compare that with the bumptious, baffling description of a broccoli-cauliflower blend called the Jacaranda from Fedco Seeds & Supplies, out of Clinton, Maine ($6.50 for a tenth of a gram):

> In a purple panic when Violet Queen was dropped, we clinked our glasses too soon over Burgundy—its utility patent violates Fedco's seed ethics. Luckily, our trials revealed Jacaranda—large broad easy-to-harvest purple heads held high on tall bushy plants. Excellent for a fall harvest, Jacaranda can be cut at full head stage, or can be left to open for floret or "stick" style harvests. Colorful florets and sweet tender stems are superb raw or lightly steamed. A veggie for our times: let us recall the 1989 anti-apartheid slogan 'The purple shall govern,' which developed after police hosed down protesters with purple water.

Wait, what?

Printed seed catalogues date to about the middle of the eighteenth century, when they really only carried imports. In January, 1786, Peter Bellet, Florist and Seedsman, advertised in the *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser* that he "has yet on hand an extensive variety of the most rare bulbous FLOWERS and SEEDS, which have not been known before in this Country," along with "Catalogues of the Names and Colours." Long before that, and long after that, most people got seeds by harvesting and saving them—in bottles and jars, in slips of paper, in cloth sacks, in barns and silos. You didn't need to buy seeds for things you could grow; you needed only to harvest and set aside some seeds for the next year, or swap with neighbors. Buying seeds from books was a gentleman's hobby. In 1788, Benjamin Rush sent George Washington a pamphlet printed in London titled "An Account of the Culture and Use of the Mangel Wurzel, or Root of Scarcity," informed him that "the botanists have agreed in its being a mongrel Species of the Beet," and enclosed "a small portion" of seeds, which Washington planted below his stable.

Still, it's handy to buy seeds, especially if you want to try out new varieties. Shakers in upstate New York started a seed business in the seventeen-nineties and, not long afterward, invented the seed packet, a paper envelope bearing small quantities of seeds and a few details. Shakers sold their seeds, door-to-door, in ingeniously designed boxes. Salesmen then started carrying seed sample books, also door-to-door. Only after the advent of chromolithography did commercial growers begin printing mail-order catalogues. That they catered not just to farmers, who knew what they were doing, but also to a newfangled thing now called an urban gardener, is shown by the fact that these catalogues came complete with planting instructions: "The ground for an asparagus bed can scarcely be made too rich," one catalogue advised, in 1853. Also, ordering anything from a catalogue was new enough that most came with detailed instructions for how to do so, along with tales of failed orders. The Long Brothers' Eighth Annual Retail Catalogue of Floricultural Stock, out of Buffalo, New York, had a column called "Perplexities of Correspondence," which in 1876 reproduced a letter from a lady in Berlin, enclosing thirty cents and requesting a catalogue. "This is received from Berlin, *somewhere*," the exasperated Long Brothers explained, but there were no fewer than eighteen towns named Berlin in the United States. By the end of the nineteenth century, as Courtney Fullilove reports in "The Profit of the Earth: The Global Seeds of American Agriculture" (2017), the United States' imperial reach meant that seeds came, more and more, from afar. "We have searched the earth, from one end to the other, so to speak, for things not only new, but of actual value," the Crosman Seed Company boasted in 1894.

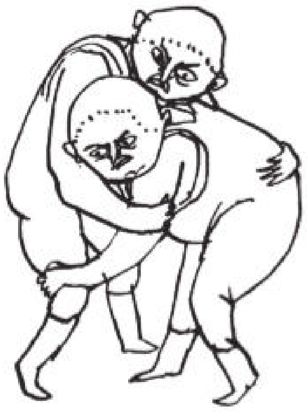
Some people save seeds; some people save old seed catalogues. Those catalogue collections have allowed scholars to document what happened to the American seed bank in the course of the twentieth century, when patented seeds, fertilizers, and insecticides increased crop yields, nearly destroyed the family farm, and dramatically diminished agricultural diversity. In 1900, nearly two in five Americans lived on farms and three in five lived in the country. Most people knew how to grow things. Then, beginning in the nineteen-twenties, came hybrid seeds, beginning with two varieties of corn. (Less than two per cent of Americans now work on farms; the biggest decline has been in the population of Black farmers, from nearly a million a century ago down to fewer than fifty thousand.) Hybrid corn grows well and can be resistant to wilt and rot, but you can't save the seeds and plant them the next year, because they don't grow true: you have to buy more seeds every year, from companies that own the patents. Hybrid corn made up less than ten per cent of the corn grown in Iowa in 1935, but ninety per cent by 1939 and a hundred per cent by 1946. Of the more than seven thousand varieties of apple grown in the United States in the nineteenth century, Janisse Ray writes in "The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution to Save Food" (2012), eighty-six per cent no longer exist; nor do ninety-five per cent of cabbages, ninety-six per cent of field corns, ninety-four per cent of peas, and eighty-one per cent of tomatoes.

"And now, prepare for the Great Feast."

I think of the middle of the twentieth century as the age of Miracle-Gro, my mother's go-to garden product, first sold in the early nineteen-fifties. Seed catalogues sold seeds brought to you by the best scientists of the atomic era. These catalogues both charmed and exasperated Katharine S. White, a former fiction editor at this magazine, who wrote a piece called "A Romp in the Catalogues" in 1958—the year Rachel Carson, at the urging of White's husband, E. B. White, began research for the book that became "Silent Spring." "For gardeners, this is the season of lists and callow hopefulness: hundreds of thousands of bewitched readers are poring over their catalogues, making lists for their seed and plant orders, and dreaming their dreams," White began. She loved seed catalogues. But she was annoyed at everything marketed as "not only 'Bigger and Better' but 'Change'—change for the sake of change, it seems." Burpee's new giant hybrid zinnias "look exactly like great, shaggy chrysanthemums," White wrote. "Now, I *like* chrysanthemums, but why should zinnias be made to look like them?"

In the nineteen-seventies, during

a back-to-the-land movement, a lot of people started saving seeds, founding seed banks, and prying open jars and crates and packets in their grandparents’ attics to find what they called heirloom seeds. William Woys Weaver was a student at the University of Virginia when he discovered his grandfather’s seed collection in his grandmother’s deep freezer. Weaver went on to write “Heirloom Vegetable Gardening” and now serves as the on-staff historian for the Whole Seed Catalog, contributing historical observations. The catalogue is full of such tidbits, about, for instance, a variety of asparagus called Conover’s Colossal (“Produce merchant S. B. Conover of New York City developed it in the 1860s, selecting for the superior market qualities of massive spears and superior high yields”) or a Chinese cucumber known as the Jade (“believed to have been brought from western China to the east during the Han dynasty in 216 A.D.”).



Seeds are the new antiques. Territorial Seeds describes one of its strawberries this way: “Discovered in a Massachusetts garden over 125 years ago, Marshall was so prized that Pioneers carried it across the continent. It found a home in the Northwest, thriving and eventually becoming the signature taste Washington and Oregon’s entire frozen fruit industry was built on. And then disaster struck.” Save the Marshall strawberry! (At $21.95 per plant, it is, however, sold out.) Buying seeds, according to a lot of these catalogues, is a political act—hence Fedco’s invoking the anti-apartheid movement to sell purple broccoli. In 1975, a couple in Missouri, starting out with two family heirlooms brought from Bavaria in 1884, founded the Seed Savers Exchange. It’s still around, a nonprofit “dedicated to the preservation of heirloom seeds,” and has been printing a catalogue for the past thirty years or so. Seed Savers, like many seed companies, is a signatory of the Safe Seed Pledge, created in 1999. It begins, “Agriculture and seeds provide the basis upon which our lives depend. We must protect this foundation as a safe and genetically stable source for future generations.” “Free the Seed!” is the motto of the Open Source Seed Initiative, established in 2012. All over the country, public libraries are giving away seeds at little seed libraries.

Farming is foundering. Gardening is growing. In the nineteen-fifties, seed catalogues sold hybrids, miracles of science: new and improved, bigger and better! In the twenty-twenties, when there are too few birds and butterflies, and too little of all kinds of wildlife, seed catalogues sell heirlooms with a promise to save the planet: old and endangered, but pure and free of corporate control. They’re selling you the idea that you can solve mangelwurtzel-size problems—climate change, biodiversity loss, the farm crisis, and a looming food catastrophe—with a packet of seeds and a patch of dirt. “Bring in the bees, butterflies, and birds with our most popular garden kit!” Prairie Moon Nursery, from Winona, Minnesota, urges. (Its “potted gardens,” like the thirty-eight-plant, fourteen-species Pollinator Garden, for $149, ship in May.) “Be a hero and plant this garden to support a herculean amount of wildlife!”

Or you could just grow some beets and eat them. You can plant them soon, so soon. Three weeks before the last frost: it’ll be here before you know it. Poke a hole in the ground half an inch deep. You can use your pinkie to measure, fingertip to first knuckle. The seeds of the common beet are about the size of peppercorns. Plop them in one by one, two inches apart. Rows are good. After a couple of weeks, when the tops pop up, yank out the seedlings that have come up too close together; I try to chuck them over the fence by smashing them with a trowel, as if they were little green-and-red badminton birdies. It passes the time. Wait another month, then dig up the roots and wash them off in the kitchen sink. They’ll be red-fleshed and globe-shaped and fist-size and grubby and hairy, and I usually roast them. You can even eat the leaves: they look like red-veined chard, and I have always found that they taste like dirt, but I don’t mind. ♦

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LIFE AND LETTERS

MAGIC REALISM

The novelist H. G. Carrillo's inventions went too far.

BY D. T. MAX

The novelist Hache Carrillo was admitted to a hospital in Washington, D.C., in April, 2020. He was fifty-nine years old, and had spent the previous several months receiving radiation treatment for prostate cancer. The first wave of the pandemic was cresting and a hospital was not a place anyone wanted to be. For two weeks, he and his husband, Dennis vanEngelsdorp, held out at their home, in Berwyn Heights, a Maryland suburb. VanEngelsdorp recalls this as "a sacred time" of chatting intimately and holding hands. They suspected that Carrillo's medication was causing him to suffer seizures and dehydration, and after he collapsed in the shower the couple headed for the E.R.

Carrillo was an admired figure in the literary world. His reputation rested on his one novel, "Loosing My Espanish," about a Cuban-born high-school history teacher in Chicago. Published in 2004, the book had impressed critics with its bravura use of wobbly Spanish to evoke the experience of an exile whose native language has been supplanted by a new one, and with its complex interweaving of colonial history and cherished memories. The prose was lush, the tales improbable: the narrator's grandfather emerges from the sea, impregnates his grandmother, then returns underwater. The Miami *Herald* declared that the novel was "of interest to everyone who has inherited a history and a language they could not fully connect with but still tried to preserve." Latino writers were especially enthusiastic: the Dominican-born Junot Díaz praised Carrillo's "formidable" talent, calling his "lyricism pitch-perfect and his compassion limitless." Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer, said of Carrillo's sensual prose, "Did you know that language can be read and heard and seen and touched? That you can smell it, taste it?"

Since 2007, Carrillo had been an assistant professor in the English department at George Washington University, where he taught Latin American literature and creative writing. Students found him demanding and engaging. On a Web site that posts ratings of professors, one undergraduate called Carrillo "scary smart," adding, "It won't be an easy semester but you won't regret it." In class, Carrillo, an elegant dresser with gapped front teeth, punctuated his English with Spanish slang—*'mano* ("bro"), *vato* ("dude"). Many Latino students were drawn to him and to his commitment to the importance of throwing off the weight of an imposed American identity and reconnecting with one's roots. At the end of some classes, he received a standing ovation.

After "Loosing My Espanish" came out, Carrillo had begun a second novel, tentatively called "Twilight of the Small Havanas," set in Miami's Little Havana on an imagined day when Fidel Castro is rumored to have been assassinated. His work had coalesced around tricky questions of history and identity: To be "Cuban," did you have to be born there? Or could you just have relatives who were? Did you need to speak Spanish, or could your affiliation be more intangible? He occasionally read sections of "Twilight" at literary conferences, but he told friends that his progress had been slowed by the amount of research required.

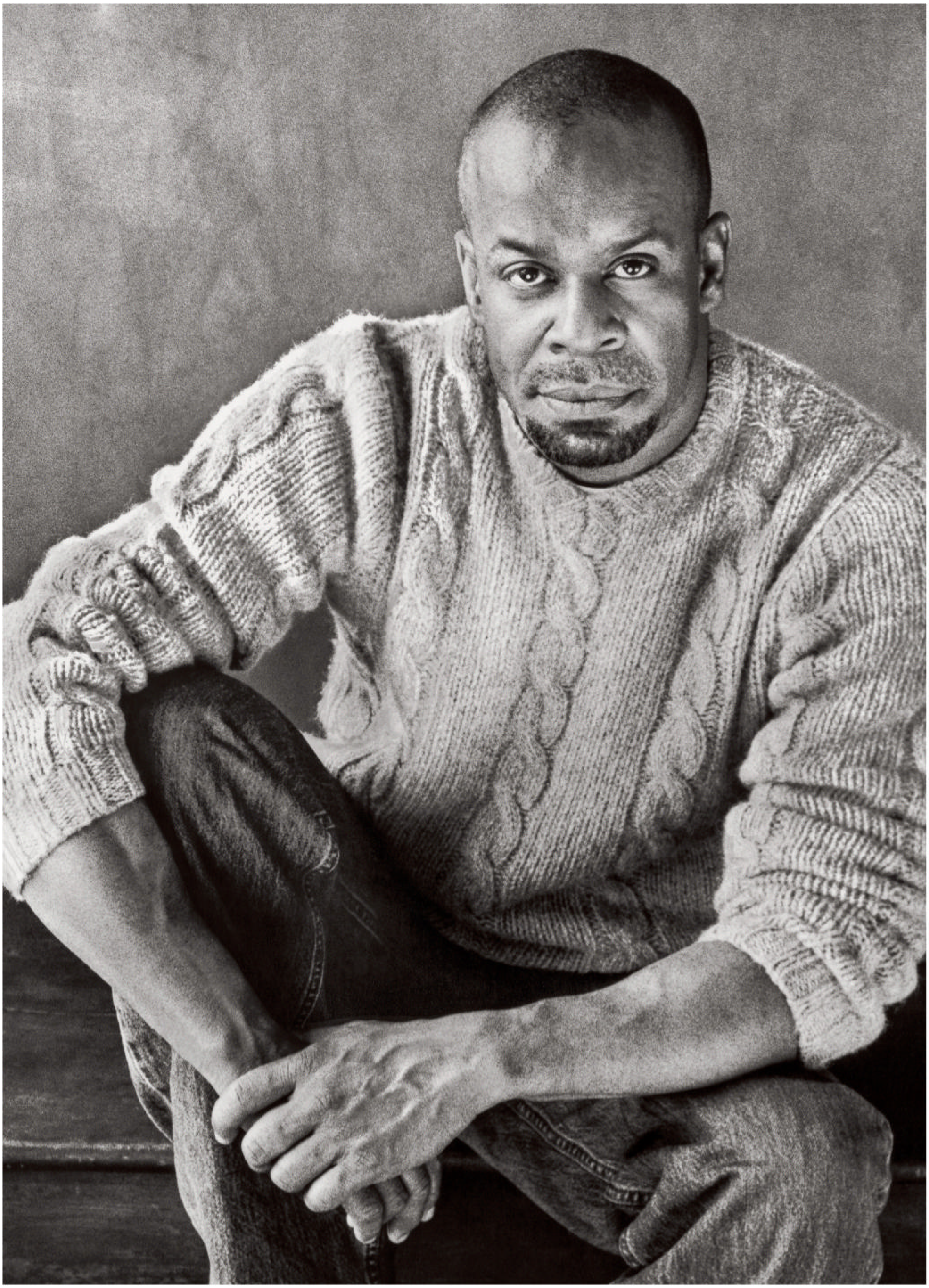
Despite Carrillo's slim output, his literary status and his popularity on campus made him feel that he might get tenure. In a 2010 review of his achievements at the school, he noted that in the previous three years he'd written a hundred and eleven recommendations for students. Around this time, when G.W.U. administrators asked him to list "major media coverage and media appearances," he noted airily, "My students watch my career more closely than I. They remind me of my upcoming readings when I have forgotten about them, as well as quote things that I have said in the media." Nevertheless, in 2013, G.W.U. did not renew Carrillo's contract, citing his lack of publications.

Carrillo transitioned out of academia with surprising ease, securing a post at the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, where he organized the judging process for an annual fifteen-thousand-dollar prize given to an American work of fiction. Soon he was tapped to be the chair of the foundation—a volunteer position but a demanding one. Outside PEN/Faulkner, though, things ran less smoothly. His supposed focus was finally finishing his second novel and selling it, but after publishing the first chapter of "Twilight," in the journal *Conjunctions*, he lost momentum again, and considered switching to a different project—a novel, called "República," about a Cuban American war hero who becomes a terrorist. He chain-smoked and procrastinated by playing the piano as much as eight hours a day.

Carrillo surrounded himself with beautiful things. He lived in a salmon-colored clapboard house with vanEngelsdorp, a Dutch-born bee entomologist ten years his junior. Carrillo had filled their place with sculptures and paintings. Bookcases were piled with hardcovers written by friends, and sheet music covered the piano. Carrillo took special pride in a brooding portrait of a heavy-browed dark-skinned young man in a T-shirt. He told visitors that the painting, which exuded a sense of distance and loss, depicted his older half brother, who had died of suicide.

In the couple's garden, vanEngelsdorp, who taught entomology at the University of Maryland, had wanted to create an ideal space for pollinators. Carrillo cared more about aesthetics. He planted so there were blooms year-round—camellia and witch hazel in January, edgeworthia and daffodils in March. Like Cuba's landscape, the garden was in perpetual flower.

Carrillo and vanEngelsdorp both wore



MARION ETTLINGER / CORBIS

One of Carrillo's ex-boyfriends said, "Herman walked the planet lying, and he might occasionally tell the truth."

masks when they went to the hospital, but Carrillo soon tested positive for COVID. Cancer had weakened his body, and it quickly became clear that he would not survive. After a week, he was transferred to hospice care. When vanEngelsdorp visited him, he wore a mask and ski goggles. Although the doctors told vanEngelsdorp that his husband could no longer hear anything, he played Carrillo one of his favorite albums, by the Cuban bolero singer La Lupe, and Carrillo seemed to react with a faint gesture of recognition. He died a week before his sixtieth birthday. VanEngelsdorp said of the final hour, "We sat together. It was beautiful to hear his last breath."

During their ten years as a couple, vanEngelsdorp had never spoken to Carrillo's three siblings. But, during the hospital stay, he got their numbers from his husband's phone and texted news of his illness. Soon after Carrillo's death, vanEngelsdorp arranged a family Zoom call. He knew the siblings by their names from the *agradecimientos*, or acknowledgments, of "Loosing My Espanish": María, Susana, and Cristóbal. María was indeed Maria, but on the Zoom call Susana called herself Susan and Cristóbal seemed to prefer Christopher. The conversation was charged with sadness and regret, and vanEngelsdorp was in a fog of exhaustion, but he sensed that something was amiss. He recalls thinking that there must be "something unspoken—maybe a family story that I would one day learn."

Herman Glenn Carroll was born on April 26, 1960, in Detroit. His parents were public-school teachers who were both promoted to administrative roles. When Glenn—as Herman was known at home, because his father shared his first name—was young, the family lived in Bagley, a modest neighborhood of Detroit. But after the riots of 1967 his parents bought a two-story home in the more comfortable Sherwood Forest area. "White families fled," Carroll's sister Susan told me. "Opportunity arose." The house was white brick with gray shutters and incongruous New Orleans-style balconies.

The Carroll parents, longtime Michiganders, were proud of the history of African Americans in Detroit, and they worked to pass that pride on to their children. When shopping, they gave preference to Black businesses. On evenings and weekends, Glenn's father worked at a center for at-risk Black youth. In Bagley, the family had hung a Black Liberation flag outside the house.

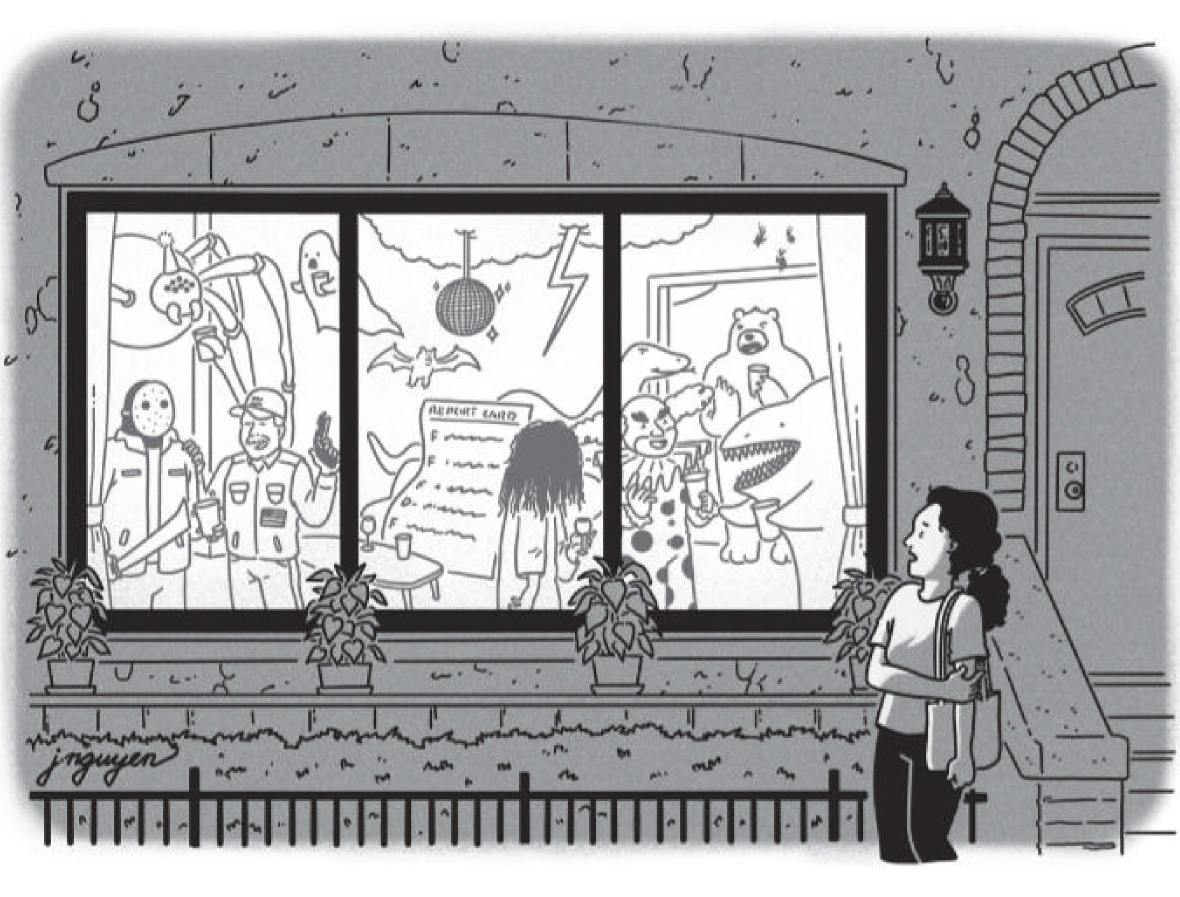
Glenn approached life with a spirit of play. He took on different identities easily and convincingly. He and Susan, who was two years younger, were best friends. Their mother spurred their imaginations by filling a bin in their basement with costumes. "We would go all day long talking gibberish to one another, and pretending we were from a different country or a different place," Susan told me, adding, "He was interested in East Indian culture, because he liked the dots they put on their heads."

Glenn was talented and competitive. His parents started him on piano lessons, but when he saw Susan playing a flute he borrowed the instrument and within a day was outplaying her. She never touched the flute again. Glenn was also labile, and when he got mad he made sure that others knew it. When he was around twelve, he got into a squabble with Susan and Maria and cut off their dolls' hair. "Look, they're dykes now," he teased.

Carroll went to a Catholic grade school and then to a Jesuit high school, where he was unhappy. "He just hated the priests," Susan remembers. In 1976, he tested into Cass Technical High School, a magnet school in downtown Detroit, and made a fresh start. His fashion choices became more daring; one student, Phillip Repasky, remembers his wearing "gabardine slacks and a silk shirt with a wild, beautiful print." He was already confident in his sexuality, and led a group that went to Menjo's, a gay club downtown. Susan told me that her brother had established at an early age his right to be who he wanted to be. When he was eight or so, he was harassed for taking ballet and tap classes, and so "he beat someone up—and that was it."

Glenn's father, the first Black quarterback to play at Eastern Michigan University, held conventional notions of masculinity, and refused to accept his son's sexuality. Glenn's mother, a practicing Catholic, was more open-minded. (An acquaintance of Glenn's remembers her as gentle and friendly—"the Black Doris Day.") When Glenn was seventeen, his parents separated.

Glenn's sexual identity seemed to interest him more than his racial one. Most students at Cass were Black, although many of Carroll's friends were white. He himself had dark skin. Phillip Brian Harper, a friend of Carroll's at the time, remembers, "We were Black kids in a majority-Black city. We didn't have to talk about it." Carroll read widely and without a focus on identity. He loved



"Not only have all my greatest fears manifested at once—they are having a party without me."

novels by Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Brautigan, and Hermann Hesse. He wrote a story titled "Mazurka on the Beach."

Part of Carroll's popularity stemmed from the colorful stories he told, but those who knew him best grew to distrust them. In his junior year, he told Harper that one of his sisters had been adopted from Asia. Harper told me, "I was very taken aback, because this was a sister he had talked about many times before." He told Repasky that his father was "someone famous." Friends rarely challenged Carroll about his tales; when crossed, he could be vindictive. If he was caught in a lie, he sometimes cried. Even his family shied away from confronting him. When he was in eleventh grade, his mother went to a parent-teacher conference and found out that her son was now calling himself Marx. He had even begun signing art works with the name. He wouldn't explain why, and wouldn't back down. "There was no rhyme or reason," his sister Susan remembers. "He was just being a character."

Carroll excelled at literature and music but was uninterested in math. In his senior year, a female friend bumped into him as he came out of an algebra class. He claimed that he was helping to teach it, but when she mentioned this to the instructor she was told that Carroll was there for remedial work.

It is not clear if Carroll graduated with his class, but he did get a diploma at some point. He definitely skipped the graduation ceremony—he'd already advanced to a new chapter in his life. During his senior year, while at Menjo's, he'd met Ken McRuer, a twenty-seven-year-old who worked as a guidance counsellor at a public school in Troy; the day Carroll turned eighteen, he moved into McRuer's apartment, in the suburb of Ferndale. They lived together for about a year.

Carroll worked as a waiter at the Midtown Café, in the suburb of Birmingham, and as a bartender at the Money Tree, a restaurant downtown. During this period, Carroll told friends that he was attending the University of Detroit Mercy part time, but McRuer never saw any textbooks. When McRuer came home at night, they watched films: Woody Allen, "La Cage aux Folles." Carroll drove an orange Beetle and read a lot of French literature. He was trying on roles, graduating from smart-aleck to aesthete. McRuer asked me, with bemusement, "Who calls their cat Maupassant?"

Toward the end of their relationship, Carroll and McRuer travelled to New York. After a quarrel, Carroll returned to their hotel claiming that he'd just been mugged at knifepoint—even though it was obvious that nothing of the sort had occurred. McRuer told me, "My impression now is his trajectory along deceit and lies and whatnot was just getting started." Carroll moved in with the female friend to whom he'd lied about teaching math at Cass. She remembers him making things up even when he wasn't under pressure: "He'd say, 'You know, I had cornflakes for breakfast and we're out of milk,' and I would be, like, 'What are you talking about? We never have cornflakes!' "

In 1995, Carroll enrolled at DePaul University, in Chicago. He was thirty-five and had knocked around for the previous decade and a half; he was ready for a change. His original reason for moving to Chicago, where he'd lived for eleven years, had been to become a writer, but he had not really known what he wanted to say. "I was only responding to a lifelong fascination of the 'thingness' and performance of books," he later explained in a publicity questionnaire that he filled out for Pantheon Books, the publisher of "Loosing My Espanish." In the years after high school, he had worked on occasional stories and had read voraciously—the novels of John Updike, Henry James, and Toni Morrison were among his favorites. But mostly he had held a string of bartending jobs and other brief gigs; according to McRuer, he worked for Amway for a while. In the Pantheon questionnaire, he claimed a more fanciful list of past employment—"custom matchbook proofreader, a shoe salesman, a canner," as well as "rehearsal pianist for ballet classes" and "gofer to the art critic for *Chicago Magazine*." He had spent much of his time, he claimed, in Puerto Rico.

Carroll was well known in North Side gay circles, and he dated a lot. His friends and family had long noted a strong preference for white men. When his mother challenged him about this, he responded that there weren't many Black men who shared his interests. His romantic life aside, he was vocal and active in support of Black rights and against racism. (He always emphasized that he was of Afro-Cuban descent. When his publisher proposed using a self-portrait of the artist Antonio Gattorno on the cover of the paperback of "Loosing My Espanish"—a novel widely presumed to be autobiographical—Carroll responded with irritation, writing that he couldn't see how an image of a "white Cuban of Italian descent relates to my narrator who is afro-cubano.")

Carroll was drawn to men who deepened his knowledge about culture, beauty, and art. He learned about antiques from a boyfriend who owned a shop. In 1986, Carroll fell in love with David Herzfeldt, an architect with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill who also designed furniture. Carroll wasn't always truthful with Herzfeldt—he claimed that he had covered the Tigers baseball team for a Detroit newspaper—but he was loyal to him. Herzfeldt, who kept a diary, thought that Carroll was emotionally wounded, and he wondered if he could win "the honor of" his trust. One entry suggests that Carroll still preferred mystery to candor. "Yesterday he undressed me, even as he put one layer of clothing on for each I lost," Herzfeldt wrote. "Eventually he had on raincoat and hat and I was naked." Herzfeldt was sick with AIDS, and Carroll stuck with him through fevers and pneumonia, until Herzfeldt's death, in 1988. Herzfeldt's sister, Donna Herzfeldt-Kamprath, told me, "Herman meant the world to my brother. I really believe it was a true-love relationship."

In Carroll's later relationships, he continued his habit of spinning elaborate stories. He told one boyfriend, David Munar—who was twenty-three when they met, in 1993—that he was under contract with *The New Yorker* and that he had had a child with a Frenchwoman. Munar recalls seeing photographs of the supposed child, along with greeting cards that the child had purportedly signed. (Neither child nor mother has ever come forward.) Carroll stayed at Munar's apartment whenever they spent the night together. One time, Carroll had a party at his place. It was furnished with valuable antiques. Munar now thinks that it was the antique-store owner's apartment, and that he was being two-timed.

Even Carroll's family had trouble sorting fact from fiction. At one point, he declared that he was in the process of adopting a seven-year-old violin prodigy named Guillermo. Carroll's mother was so convinced that Guillermo was real that she sent him Christmas presents from Detroit, but the family never met the boy and Carroll eventually said that the adoption had fallen through. (Later, in a flourish worthy of Representative George Santos, Carroll told his sister Maria that the child had gone on to Juilliard.) Shane Conner, a lawyer who dated Carroll in the mid-nineties, after Munar, told me, "Most people might tell a little lie, but, generally speaking, you walk the planet telling people the truth. Herman walked the planet lying, and he might *occasionally* tell the truth. It wasn't malicious—it was a compulsion." Carroll told Conner, falsely, that he had degrees from Dartmouth and the University of Chicago. Dating Carroll made you doubt even things that were true, Conner told me: when Carroll took him to see the grave of Herzfeldt, the man he had nursed through AIDS, they couldn't find it, and Conner concluded that he had made up the story.

Carroll's final job before enrolling at DePaul was a six-year stint at the Chicago office of HBO. Although in later interviews Carroll would refer to glamorous Manhattan visits for his job in "television," he was in fact the director of staff development at a call center whose employees hawked the channel to satellite-TV customers. According to Liz Pentin, a colleague and friend of Carroll's, he oversaw fewer than a hundred people, though his 2005 résumé claims two thousand.

At HBO, Carroll threw himself into the administrative tasks of training and managing employees. "His bosses respected his work," Pentin told me. But he hadn't given up on invention. She recalls him speaking in a pointedly refined manner—"not quite Jane Austen, but cultivated." He informed Pentin that his father was a Persian-rug dealer and that he had once "caught the baby" being delivered by a woman whose partner had abandoned her after she became pregnant. Later, he recommended to Pentin a favorite novel: Melville's "The Confidence-Man."

Carroll left HBO under unclear circumstances. On his Pantheon publicity form, he wrote that his position had been eliminated and that he'd been offered a transfer to an office in Albuquerque. But his boss at the time remembers no such office, and Carroll's sister Susan thinks he was fired after the company learned that he didn't have a college degree, as he had claimed on his résumé. After HBO and Carroll parted ways, his then boyfriend Conner suggested that he stop faking having a B.A. and get a real degree. "Do you think I could?" Carroll said. "I *know* you could," Conner replied.

At DePaul, Carroll felt that he had come out of the wilderness; as he later told an interviewer, "I was odd and strange and a whole bunch of other things, and I read books nobody else had read and I wanted to talk about things nobody was interested in." Now he read Langston Hughes and European literature. He took courses in literary theory and devoured Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideas about "homosocial" narratives, though he was resistant to Louis Althusser's stance that an individual's identity was determined by the state. Todd Parker, the professor who taught him Althusser, remembers Carroll wondering aloud "if there was room for individual agency in the construction of identity."

Carroll became friends with Parker and several other professors—they were nearer to his age than most of the students were. They were dazzled by his commitment and acuity. He was showing signs of becoming a writer, too. Anne Calcagno, who led a creative-writing workshop, remembers him as among the most talented students she ever encountered. Once, she was talking about the importance of vivid description, and Carroll offered an example: "stigmata nail polish." She recalls telling herself, "O.K., *that* guy gets an A." (Carroll told her that his father was a surgeon and that his mother was the dean of students at the University of Michigan.)

Carroll had a breakthrough as a writer in a class called World Civilization. For one assignment, students were allowed to write historical fiction, and he submitted a work titled "Snow/Yellow Food/Brown People, Miami y Los Santos in an Absence of History." It opens with overtones of "One Hundred Years of Solitude," which famously begins with a Colombian colonel recalling his astonishment the first time he saw ice. In Carroll's story, which is set in Michigan, a young Cuban American from Miami is stunned by the sight of snow. But the story shifts its focus to the young man's sister, Yesinia, who "decided one day that she was *just* black," denying her Cubanness. She is delighted when Black girls at her school assume that her long, silky hair is the result of relaxer—"concoctions of mayonnaise and beer." She defends her invented identity to such an extent that, the narrator notes, "if one of us forgot and asked her a question in Spanish in front of her friends, she would shoot a look that indicated that she could potentially cut anyone's . . . tongue out." Yesinia's self-hatred begins to infect her brother, and he lashes out at anyone who makes him feel bad about his heritage. Eventually, a priest at the boy's school guides him to a thick volume of Cuban history, and he learns that things he thought were just family myths possessed "a reality that I had never experienced before": "Names of places that we had heard all of our lives like Havana from where our mother and Tío Nestor and his wife had immigrated, and Guantanamo Bay where our *aubelo* [sic] had died could actually be pointed to as places that existed in the world." Carroll's professor, Regina Wellner, loved the story. She gave Carroll an A and commented, "Great!," adding that the succulent descriptions of Cuban food had made her hungry.

As a writer, Carroll had found his way to a question that would prove fertile to him: How much does race or ethnicity determine who you have to be? He had completed stories before, but they'd lacked urgency. In 1990, he had published a four-page piece, "The Train," in the small Chicago magazine *Other Voices*. It appears to be the only time that his published work featured protagonists that were not overtly Latino. The story is told from the point of view of a middle-class father whose wife has recently left him. His teen-age son comes home traumatized from an El ride during which a man fell out of an open door. They watch television that evening, and, as the train incident is recounted on the news, the father comforts his child and grieves the departure of his wife. The father says of his son, “I think that we both think that he’ll be O.K.” The story is skillfully written, but there’s an artificiality to the parallel traumas.

For Carroll, writing fiction made the boundary between reality and invention even more porous. In 1998, he joined a DePaul student named Tiffany Villa-Ignacio in editing the school’s literary magazine. Carroll told her that he’d become interested in digging into his Latino origins. The pair—Carroll nearly forty, Villa-Ignacio twenty-three—took tango lessons at the Old Town School of Folk Music. One day, Villa-Ignacio, who is of Philippine ancestry, announced that she wanted to change her name to Teresa—to remove, she explained, the burden of “too many imperial legacies in my name.” Carroll said that his own real name had been blotted out by history, and asked her to call him Hermán, which he later shortened to Hache—the letter “H” in Spanish.

The desire, verging on belief, that he was Latino had been gestating in Carroll for a long time. As a teen-ager, he had hung out with a trans person, named Miss Q’uba, who styled herself as a drag queen. (A Cass classmate of Carroll’s remembers Carroll taking him to meet Miss Q’uba at a house in Detroit’s Palmer Park neighborhood.) His boyfriend David Munar, who was of Colombian origin, introduced him to other aspects of Latino culture, including how to prepare *arroz con pollo*. In 1997, the Buena Vista Social Club ensemble released its blockbuster album of Afro-Cuban classics—if you went dancing in Chicago, bolero and *danzón* music were omnipresent. Wim Wenders soon made a popular documentary about the group. In the summer of 1998, Carroll took an introductory Spanish course.

For someone who kept straining to leave behind his old identity, what better subject was there than Cuba—a country whose population had been divided by a mass exodus? On the Pantheon questionnaire, Carroll gave a slippery account of how he’d rediscovered his Cuban roots: “Óscar’s voice, the voice of *Loosing My Espanish*, began to appear late every Friday night into Saturday morning for four years as I tried to shake off too much rum, cigar smoke, cafecitos had at a weekly domino game at Chicago’s Café Bolero.”

“I got you the same thing.”

In 2000, Carrillo, after graduating from DePaul, was admitted to a joint M.F.A./Ph.D. program at Cornell. By this point, everything about him spoke of his Cubanness: his language, his cultural references, his guayabera shirts. Helena María Viramontes, who was the chair of his M.F.A. committee, told me, “I never tested him. But there was no doubt in my mind that he was what he said he was.” Carrillo’s application included the opening of what would become “Loosing My Espanish.” The excerpt describes an immigrant boy in Chicago disappearing through a treacherous hole in an ice sheet covering the Illinois River. Viramontes found it extraordinary, and was even more impressed by the novel that followed four years later (and that was eventually submitted to his advisers at Cornell). She admired the “beauty of language as well as the code-switching” in “Loosing My Espanish,” and recalls the Ecuadorian-Puerto Rican writer Ernesto Quiñonez telling her, “Hache is our Proust.” (In an e-mail, Quiñonez said that Carrillo “wrote like no other Latinx,” adding, “Like Proust he could stop time and write 50 pages about having a cup of tea.”)

Toward the beginning of “Loosing My Espanish,” Carrillo writes, “Ay pobrecito, hombres history is only the memory of others in which you insinuate yourself.” Being remembered and remembering are the twin tasks that Óscar Delossantos, the high-school teacher who is the novel’s protagonist, sets for himself. His two kinds of remembering face off against two kinds of forgetting: that of his mother, who has dementia, and that of his students, mainly American-born Latinos who are ignorant of their heritage. Delossantos begins his tale by mixing the personal and the historical with zestful bombast:

> Miren my hands. This color on the map, this bit of orange here. Illinois. Chicago stares me in the face every morning when I shave, señores. My face, this color, a subtle legacy of the British Royal African Company, is, as they say in the vernacular, el color of my Espanish.

Delossantos launches into a headlong, Spanglish-studded lecture on Cuba: its rain-drenched forests, its achingly beautiful waters, its Santería and *brujería.* A woman wades, fully dressed, into a hurricane-wracked sea; a capitalistic dog devours the cats of the posh El Vedado neighborhood.

These memories are juxtaposed with the drearier life that Delossantos’s family now lives. The clan has arrived in Chicago by a familiar route: fleeing from Castro’s Cuba via Miami, where some family members were met with “yards of concertina wire, dogs with vicious teeth and feet and yards and cubic miles of forms with thousands and thousands of blank spaces to be completed.” Delossantos attends the same school in Chicago where he will one day teach; his mother goes to work in a beauty salon. Magic realism meets dirty realism: a character is haunted by a bird spirit called La Pirata; a mysterious benefactor pays his mother's overdue electric bill. Beneath it all lies the distinction that, whereas being Cuban in Cuba is a nationality, here it is an identity. By the novel's end, Delossantos is exhausted by his own lecture—and uncertain if he has changed anyone's opinion about the importance of remembering. He concludes, "Pero that's the funny thing about time and saying something, señores, because the exact moment I said it was the same moment that it began to be untrue."

In October, 2020, I sat with Dennis vanEngelsdorp on the porch of the house he had once shared with his husband. Goldenrod and moon lilies were blooming in the garden. VanEngelsdorp's blind dog, Huddy, waited patiently by the screen door.

A few months earlier, Carrillo's twenty-year-long fabrication of his life as a Latino man had come undone. On May 22nd of that year, the Washington *Post* had published an obituary. It gave Carrillo's background as vanEngelsdorp had understood it. It reported that Carrillo "was 7 when his father, a physician; his mother, an educator; and their four children fled Fidel Castro's island in 1967, arriving in Michigan by way of Spain and Florida. Growing up, he was something of a prodigy as a classical pianist, and, by his late teens, was performing widely in the United States and abroad." Of those fifty-six words, only a handful were accurate: Carrillo's mother had indeed been a teacher; there were four children.

It had taken a month of jockeying by Carrillo's friend and longtime agent, Stuart Bernstein, to get the obit to appear at all. Carrillo, at his death, was only modestly well known: his output was too limited, his fiction too complex. ("Loosing My Espanish" had sold only fifty-six hundred copies.) He may have known intuitively that too much attention would create problems for him. There were plenty of people who knew of his deceit and might have exposed it. His former boyfriend Shane Conner had kept up with Carrillo since Chicago. But Conner had never forgotten the time that Carrillo and vanEngelsdorp had joined him for dinner while they were visiting Chicago, a decade ago. There was some confusion with the bill, and it prompted Conner to recall a similar mixup that he and Carrillo had experienced when eating out with Carrillo's family in Detroit, in the nineties. The memory, however, violated Carrillo's new narrative, in which his childhood in Detroit never existed. As Conner recalls it, Carrillo looked him "dead in the eye—and I knew he was not messing around—and said, 'If you do this, I will never speak to you again.'"

The G.W.U. faculty ought to have had an inkling of Carrillo's trickery. Ten or so years ago, David Munar sent a letter to administrators there saying that Carrillo was a fraud, but he received no answer. A native Cuban visiting professor listening to Carrillo's Spanish concluded that something was off about who he claimed to be—but the doubt was never pursued. For some, the damning evidence was to be found in "Loosing My Espanish," with its inconsistent, often awkward Spanish. Words are misspelled, accents misplaced. The word *vato*, which he uses often in the book, is Mexican slang, not Cuban. Soon after Carrillo joined the faculty, Javier Aguayo, a Peruvian-born political scientist there, began dating him, and tried to read "Loosing My Espanish." He recalls, "I couldn't go beyond the first three pages. The grammar was wrong. He referred to a woman with 'castellano hair.' Nobody says those kinds of things!" In his view, these weren't the type of lapses that a Spanish speaker forgetting the language would make; they were mistakes that someone *learning* the language—or relying on a dictionary—would make. Aguayo wondered why no one else had noticed this ersatz quality.

Other Latino writers thought that the question of linguistic fidelity was murkier. The variety of Spanish dialects made it difficult to come to a firm conclusion. Manuel Muñoz, an American-born novelist of Mexican ancestry and an early supporter of the novel, who had been up for the same job as Carrillo at G.W.U., noted to me, "An ex of mine was Cuban and we completely confused each other with the word for 'snake': he used *majá* and I used *víbora*, and neither of us had ever heard the other word." Carrillo didn't speak Spanish fluently—and would sometimes duck occasions when he was expected to do so by claiming to have a migraine—but Viramontes, his mentor, pointed out that it wasn't unusual for Latin-born academics who had come to America as children to speak little or no Spanish.

Even if Carrillo's colleagues sensed that the way he spoke about his life was mythic—he told one G.W.U. professor that his ancestors had been enslaved workers on a plantation owned by forebears of Desi Arnaz—they embraced his aura of mystery. In 2010, Faye Moskowitz, a professor in the creative-writing program, was quoted in an article in the G.W.U. newspaper celebrating Carrillo. "Is there a mystique about people who are known by a single name?" she said. "Elvis? Beyoncé? Madonna? We in the Creative Writing Program have our own single-name star. Hache is what we call him."

After Carrillo's death, his siblings also had no desire to expose his lies. They were grieving, and had long been inured to their brother's lack of restraint—sometimes they were even amused by it. He had become the crazy uncle in the family, the one who entertained their kids. Maria recalls her children making French toast with her brother and crying out, in astonishment, "Your nipples are pierced!," after he insisted on changing into a chef's uniform. They even came to call him Tío—Uncle—at his request.

Although Carrillo's family didn't take his fabulations seriously, they told me, they also didn't realize how far the stories had gone. When they saw their names Hispanicized in the *agradecimientos* of "Loosing My Espanish," they thought it was just their brother using a literary persona. When they stumbled upon Carrillo's Wikipedia page, not long after the novel's release, they presumed that, like so many other entries, it had been written by someone who didn't know all the facts. They also assumed that if he pushed his games of make-believe too far someone would call a halt to them. In fact, they were surprised that no one had done so already. "How come there were no background checks?" Susan Carroll asked me. "We didn't understand how he got employed." She added, "If someone would have asked me, I would have told them. But nobody asked."

By the time Carrillo published "Loosing My Espanish," he was officially who he claimed to be: in June, 2003, shortly

ECSTASIES

Catch me alive? I am today—swept through the air in a flesh,
thinky-feeling, lugging itself up the subway stairs
& now back on Spring Street again in the dazing light

pumping the marrow a breeze of breath a blood
& still the minutes accelerate & we wake backweighted
with days will we waste them all & then when we get there

we will think I wasted them all, stony before I was laid
in stone, mourning before I was mourned
& what was this velvet for? Spring didn't know—

flags of the grave? well also a jubilance not just a bawling
& off again toward whatever, drinking exalted or coughing
but still can swallow & here all your parts are warm & mostly work

& look it's luck, while not yet a word from the underworld,
the necklace of days bracelets of hours the flush of blood
present swelling the yes please of sex the abject of—

is it precarious yes exquisite *alive*, staging its trance
the hand in hand, my mouth sloshed with coffee, sugared & warm,
your silent reading this now.

—Deborah Landau

before the book came out, he legally changed his surname to Carrillo.

He had to work hard to keep his two lives separate: family who visited D.C. found him unreachable or available to meet only at restaurants. Friends from his HBO days made plans to see him, only to have him stand them up. There were close calls. In 2007, when Carrillo joined G.W.U.'s faculty, he was likely shocked to find that another member of the department was Robert McRuer, a nephew of Ken McRuer, Carrillo's old lover from Detroit. The younger McRuer didn't get why Carrillo kept his distance. When Carrillo's mother died, in 2015, and vanEngelsdorp asked to attend the funeral, in Detroit, his husband lied and said it was a small commemoration. "He made me feel I would have just added stress to the situation," vanEngelsdorp said.

Carrillo never cut himself off entirely from his family. He often called his sisters and chatted for hours. Sometimes he entertained them with stories of the insects that his entomologist husband kept in the freezer—he even sent photographs—but until vanEngelsdorp texted them about their brother's struggles in the hospital they wondered whether vanEngelsdorp was just another Carrillo invention. "We were *amazed* Dennis was real," Susan said.

Only one family member—Susan's daughter, Jessica Webley—was moved to correct Carrillo's deceitful narrative. When her uncle died, she was living in the Sherwood Forest house that Carrillo had grown up in. She had moved in to look after her sick grandmother, who, she says, had been hurt by her son's denial of his heritage. The *Post* obituary, which Webley saw online, outraged her. "Once it was on record that this is who my uncle was, I had to step in and say no," Webley told me last summer, when we met outside Detroit. Webley, who works for an at-home medical-care company, teared up as she recalled her decision to expose her beloved uncle. (He called her *minouche*—French for "kitty.")

To correct the record, she had added a comment to the *Post's* Web site, saying that she was Hache Carrillo's niece, and explaining, "He was born Herman Glenn Carroll. To his family we call him Glenn." She continued, "I cannot correct all the lies in this article," appending the hashtag #FakeNews. A commenter calling herself Lady MacBeth shot back, calling her "some anonymous troll'y 'niece,'" and adding, "People are grieving here. Go pollute some other thread." Webley responded, "I am grieving as well." She then sent an e-mail to the obituary's author, Paul Duggan. By the next day, the newspaper had emended the article to explain Carrillo's double life; when it appeared in the print edition, the day after that, it was correct.

On the porch, vanEngelsdorp was genial and thoughtful; he seemed like a man it would be cruel to trick. He'd taken comfort in the fact that his European friends and family weren't much bothered by Carrillo's duplicity. "My best friend, who lives in Sweden, literally said, 'Dennis, I don't understand what the big deal is,'" vanEngelsdorp told me. He acknowledged being bewildered and hurt by his husband's lies, yet he wasn't sure that Carrillo owed him an apology. "I'm a *little* bit proud of him," he admitted. "I feel conflicted." His science background also helped him absorb what Carrillo had done. VanEngelsdorp explained, "Since there's no such thing biologically as race, it has to be a cultural construct, and if it's cultural then it's performance." His husband had taken this logic to its inevitable conclusion. In vanEngelsdorp's more forgiving moments, he was at peace knowing that "the only true things he ever told me about his life was his birthday and the fact that he was Catholic."

VanEngelsdorp had several explanations for failing to see through the charade. Especially when they first were together, he was often off doing field work. He added that he had a bad memory and was prone to abstraction; he had also been abused as a child, and was thus inclined to allow others the privacy of their pasts, and reluctant to probe beneath the surface of things. He gave an example. In 2013, Maryland legalized same-sex marriage, which, paradoxically, threatened the protections of civil partnership which Carrillo and vanEngelsdorp had previously enjoyed. They had to get married quickly, and to complete the paperwork vanEngelsdorp needed Carrillo's passport. Carrillo resisted but, just before the deadline, gave it to his partner. Opening the document, vanEngelsdorp

Victoria Roberts

"O.K., you walk at your own pace and I'll walk at mine, and we'll see who gets where."

was surprised to see Carrillo's place of birth listed as "Detroit." Carrillo smoothly explained that, under a congressional bill known as the Wet Feet/Dry Feet Act, wherever a Cuban exile first settled was listed as his place of birth. VanEngelsdorp had accepted the story, he told me, without entirely believing it. "I saw what I needed to see," he said.

We went inside. Carrillo's ashes were in a container on the piano. We had pea soup that vanEngelsdorp had made, and he continued to ponder why he hadn't worked harder to find out the truth. He recalled that Carrillo had once told him he'd sold a vase they'd bought together for a big profit, but never produced the money. Shortly afterward, vanEngelsdorp found the vase in a dresser drawer. He described the terror on his husband's face when he saw him making this discovery: "It was just so clear. There was panic in his eyes." He decided then that he could tolerate some myths. "If you need me to believe that you sold that vase—I mean, why *wouldn't* I give that to you?"

He acknowledged that the deceit had left "holes" in their relationship. He even wondered if the stress of living a double life could kill a person. As he had reckoned with Carrillo's duplicities, he looked for signs of kindness. He told me that his husband had shredded a lot of papers while they lived together but had saved one old box of financial records. After so much gaslighting, vanEngelsdorp found it consoling to think that Carrillo had left behind these documents so that he could know at least some things had been true.

VanEngelsdorp had already learned that a house he thought he was going to inherit in Puerto Rico had never been Carrillo's. He was girding himself for more unsettling discoveries. When Carrillo died, he'd left behind a locked laptop. VanEngelsdorp planned to send it to a colleague at the University of Maryland who might be able to hack its password, though it seemed to me that he was less curious about what else might be hidden than about what it had cost his husband to hide it.

I visited vanEngelsdorp again this past January. The witch hazel was in bloom. Huddy had died. In the previous sixteen months, he had scattered his husband's ashes and given away the piano, moved upstairs some of Carrillo's "darker" pictures (though not the one with the fake half brother), and filled the house with tall flowering plants that Carrillo would have hated. He had a new partner, a man whose name was Juan but who did not pretend to be Latino. Juan joined us for a chicken pot pie that vanEngelsdorp had prepared.

VanEngelsdorp said that he'd grown more certain in the past year that he had been lucky to be married to Carrillo. His husband, he assured me, had not wronged him: "He knew that if I found out I'd be O.K. I think he knew that the way I thought would eventually come to the place I'm in now." He and the Carroll family had grown friendly, and he was looking forward to enjoying more of their company.

The cultural discussion around Carrillo, meanwhile, had shifted from how he had perpetrated his fraud to what the response to his cultural vulturism should be. Not all of Carroll's friends were as forgiving as vanEngelsdorp. Gina Franco, a poet who was exploring her Mexican roots when she became friends with Carrillo at Cornell, said, "He played with my very vulnerable feelings about my own identity. He manipulated me into a friendship and he lied to me. He knew I was scared of being seduced by narratives and he *still* did it." Everyone agreed that Carrillo's students, especially those of Latin ancestry, had been victimized. Jeffrey Cohen, who was the department head at G.W.U. when Carrillo was hired, told me, "There doesn't seem to me anything great or admirable about deceiving people, especially young people, even if the fiction was spun charismatically."

Public comment split along predictable lines. Conservatives asked if a white professor would be so easily forgiven. Some critics on the left saw Carrillo as a victim of internalized self-hatred in a racist society—an exemplum of W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness." Carroll's family wasn't persuaded by this interpretation. "I really don't think he was hiding from his Blackness," his sister Maria told me. "I just think he wanted a more interesting narrative to his story, and who better to write it than himself?" Susan Carroll had taken a DNA test to make sure that her brother hadn't actually been telling the truth about his background, and had confirmed that she had no Latin heritage: the family's ancestry was mostly Nigerian.

Around the time of Carrillo's death, the writer Jeanine Cummins published "American Dirt," an awkward thriller about Mexican migrants. The publicity campaign emphasized that she identified as Latina, but when it was revealed that she had no Mexican heritage, and was only one-quarter Puerto Rican, the backlash was fierce; Cummins was accused of engaging in an unseemly masquerade. The Chicana writer Myriam Gurba denounced the work, writing, "'American Dirt' fails to convey any Mexican sensibility. It aspires to be Día de los Muertos but it, instead, embodies Halloween." At G.W.U., discussions of Carrillo's deceptions led to the unmasking of another professor: Jessica Krug, an expert on African American history, who had falsely claimed to be partially Black. In an online confession, she wrote, "For the better part of my adult life, every move I've made, every relationship I've formed, has been rooted in the napalm toxic soil of lies." She resigned shortly afterward.

In recent decades, various writers have published work under fake ethnic identities—but often the deceptions have involved white writers engaged in perverse acts of grievance about identity politics. In 2015, an obscure white poet named Michael Derrick Hudson posed as a woman named Yi-Fen Chou, then revealed his identity after a poem was selected for the "Best American Poetry" anthology. But publishing under a name borrowed from another ethnicity is easier than actually *assuming* the ethnicity associated with that name. In 1984, Daniel James, who had published "Famous All Over Town," a novel about Mexican Americans, under the pseudonym Danny Santiago, won a five-thousand-dollar award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, but, seeing no way to show up and claim it, he skipped the ceremony. In the late nineties, Laura Albert began posing as the queer male novelist J. T. LeRoy; her public face was her androgynous relative Savannah Knoop, whose clumsy impersonation ultimately caused the scheme to unravel. The singular aspect of Carroll's ruse is that he didn't just write as Carrillo; he became Carrillo. Perhaps he thought that, if he didn't assume the personality that the name suggested, no one would find his portrait of Cuban American culture convincing. Or maybe the skeptic he was trying hardest to persuade was himself.

"Loosing My Espanish," it seems clear to me, is not the straightforward act of narration it was first generally understood to be. Carrillo amplifies qualities that Latin American fiction was then known for—exuberance, sensuality, creamy flan, waving palm trees—to the point of parody. The word *guayaba*, Spanish for "guava," appears twenty-three times. In an essay that he never published, Carrillo described the novel as "an exploration of the ways in which *cubanidad* in the United States had been commodified and orientalized within the US American imaginary since Wim Wenders's 'Buena Vista Social Club.'" Seen in this light, there's a mischievous subtext to "Loosing My Espanish"; critics who took it at face value became part of the joke. (The novelist Alexis Romay, who was born in Cuba, described the novel to me as "shtick," and the writer Achy Obejas, a Havana native who briefly taught Carrillo in a Cuban American literature class at DePaul—he dropped it after two days—believes that the novel's "performance of Cubanness was mostly directed at non-Cubans.")

Todd Parker, Carrillo's theory teacher at DePaul, told me that Carrillo "may have decided that since you can't beat them, *co-opt* them." Carrillo had even engaged in a similar burlesque with his life. Many of the people he duped recall him preparing them comically lavish Cuban meals: piles of *arroz con pollo* topped off with *flan de guayaba* supposedly based on his grandmother's special recipe. Inevitably, a Celia Cruz record was spinning on the stereo.

Carrillo seems to have been unable to keep up this complex cultural dance. VanEngelsdorp informed me that, in the interval between my visits, a tech expert had broken into Carrillo's laptop. Its contents had been disappointing. There were class syllabi, piano scores, and old drafts of published work. There were no anguished journal entries in which Carrillo wrote about his secrets. And although there was a bit of new fiction, he had evidently hit a wall. The final piece of fiction that Carrillo wrote, dating from around 2017, was a chapter of what would have been the middle of "Twilight of the Small Havanas"—the novel set on the day of Fidel Castro's rumored assassination. The novel's ambition is hinted at in its epigraph, a line from the poet Anne Carson: "To live past the end of your myth is a perilous thing." The line clearly refers to Castro, but it also seems to apply to one of the book's protagonists: an elegant and fastidious young émigré who has a gift for reading other people and getting what he wants from them. He travels around America telling fake stories about how his family has suffered: he is the indigent son of a disgraced Argentinean businessman; his mother was raped by Shining Path rebels; his parents were among the disappeared in El Salvador. Moved by these stories, people give him money, jewelry, keys to cars, heroin. The young man's actual origins remain obscure. (In a précis of the novel, Carrillo writes of the character's agility at being a "professional Latino.")

A former graduate student in ornithology named Xiomara joins the young man on his travels, and he tutors her in the art of self-invention. She can be "anything or anyone," he tells her. "You can be the queen of Romania, a nine-year-old Hindu boy, a clutch of Peruvian artibeus—but never, ever, yourself." When, under his guidance, she tells her first lies, she feels that "she had suddenly felt a part of herself come into a more real existence than it ever had been before." But she is not a natural deceiver, and as they continue their journey she ponders her enigmatic companion: who is this man who can manipulate everyone, including her? The text file on the computer breaks off in midsentence, with Xiomara imagining herself a bird: "turning and turning, she had beaten up clouds of dust around the boy that copied themselves and copied themselves un"—

Until what? It's hard to know where Carrillo meant to take his story. "Twilight of the Small Havanas" is, like "Loosing My Espanish," an attempt to present Latin identity as a baroque performance. But the plot seems to be heading toward a crisis point. This confidence man will reveal who he is and why he is this way. Such understandings, Xiomara senses, are the true goal of life and literature, and she is ready to hear the truth. "His heart, his heart, his heart," Carrillo writes. "All she knows is how badly she had wanted to open him up—split him down the breast plate—dissect and examine this thing he kept calling his heart." ♦

ANNALS OF SCIENCE

A LITTLE-KNOWN PLANET

An entomologist races to find caterpillars before they disappear.

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

The Devils River, in southwestern Texas, runs, mirage-like, along the edge of the Chihuahuan Desert, through some of the most barren countryside in the United States. Access to the river is limited; unless you're in a kayak, the only way to travel upstream is along a skein of rutted dirt roads. It was on one of these roads that, a few years ago, David Wagner noticed a shrub that seemed to him peculiarly filled with promise.

Wagner is an entomologist who teaches at the University of Connecticut. He has close-cropped silvery hair and a square jaw and bears a passing resemblance to George C. Scott playing General Buck Turgidson. The way other people might recall a marvellous restaurant or a heartbreaking vista, Wagner remembers a propitious plant. He has friends who own a house along the Devils River, and each time he has visited them he has stopped by the exact same shrub to investigate. No luck. This past October, I was travelling with him when he tried yet again. He spread a white nylon sheet on the ground, then started whacking the bush with a pole to dislodge anything that might be clinging to it.

"Un-fucking-believable!" he exclaimed. I was whacking a plant nearby, just for the hell of it. Wagner held out his hand. A caterpillar about three-quarters of an inch long was wriggling across his palm. It looked brownish and totally ordinary until I examined it under a loupe, at which point it was revealed to be flamboyantly striped, with yellow and red splotches and two black, hornlike protuberances sticking out of its back. Based on a series of taxonomic calculations, Wagner was convinced that the caterpillar was the juvenile form of an exceptionally rare moth known as *Ursia furtiva*.

"No one's ever seen this before," he told me. If Wagner was the first person to lay eyes on an *Ursia furtiva* caterpillar, I figured, that meant I was the second. Un-fucking-believable.

Caterpillars are to lepidoptera—butterflies and moths—what grubs are to beetles and maggots are to flies; they are larvae. Even among nature lovers, larvae tend to be unloved. For every ten butterfly fanciers, there are approximately zero caterpillar enthusiasts. The reason for this will, to most, seem obvious. The worm in the apple is usually a caterpillar.

Wagner specializes in caterpillars, or, it might be more accurate to say, is consumed by them. (They are, he suggested to me, the reason he is no longer married.) Probably he knows more about the caterpillars of the U.S. than anyone else in the country, and possibly he knows more about caterpillars in general than anyone else on the planet. When he travels, it's not uncommon for him to return home with a suitcase full of specimens. Most of these he has injected with alcohol; some, though, may remain alive, nestled in little vials of their favorite plants.

Wagner's "Caterpillars of Eastern North America," published in 2005, runs to nearly five hundred pages. It relates the life histories of roughly that many species and is considered the definitive field guide on the subject. Wagner is now thirteen years into an even more ambitious project, "Caterpillars of Western North America," which he plans to publish in four volumes.

The implicit argument of Wagner's work is that every larva matters, no matter how small, squishy, and unassuming. Each new species that he collects is a different answer to life's great conundrum: how to survive on planet Earth. Each has a unique and often startling story to tell.

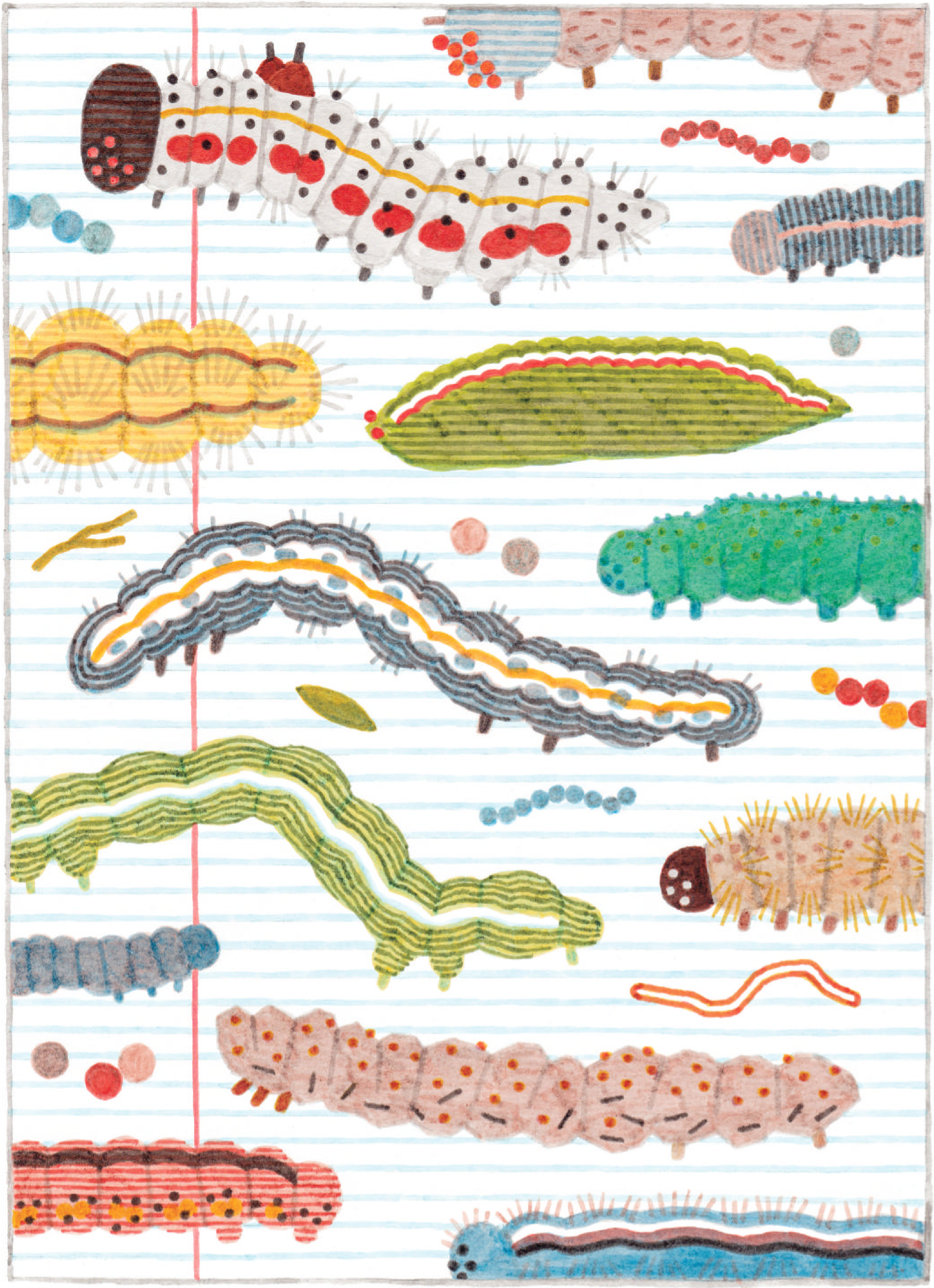
"I want to write each species account so you want to read one more," he told me. "I want it to be a page-turner."

Wagner, who is sixty-six, grew up pretty much all over the place. His father, a metallurgist, worked for U.S. Steel, and the family moved whenever he was assigned to a new project—a bridge in one state, a pipeline in another. In second grade, Wagner attended three different schools. "I don't know where I'm from," he told me. At one school, in Missouri, he remembers, he was greeted by kids throwing rocks at him.

From an early age, he was interested in bugs. He collected them in an old cigar box, which moved from town to town with him. "They meant the world to me," he said. "I would go into my room at night, and I would look at them with a hand lens. There was an infinite amount of beauty and complexity there." Though his parents didn't share his interest, they abetted it. They bought him "A Field Guide to the Butterflies of North America, East of the Great Plains," which he read so often that the cover fell off.

"That book was a portal for me," Wagner said. "I was able to see into another world, and I was fascinated by it." A Christmas letter his father sent to a relative in 1966 describes Wagner, then in fifth grade, as interested in "anything that crawls or moves." His father writes that he is sorry to be unable to answer Wagner's "million and one questions per day."

In college, at Colorado State, Wagner took classes from Howard Ensign Evans, an expert on wasps who had given up a tenured professorship at Harvard to move to the Rockies. Evans was the author of "Life on a Little-Known Planet," a book that, by entomological standards, counted as a blockbuster. Published in 1968, it was a paean to the sorts of insects people usually regard as pests—locusts, for example, and bedbugs. (Evans dedicated the book to the lice and silverfish that shared



Some scientists warn of an insect apocalypse. The flying-insect community has been "decimated," a research paper said.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOCHEN GERNER

his office.) It was also a plea for insect conservation. Americans, Evans lamented, seemed more curious about what might live on Mars than about the many uncatalogued creatures living right beneath their feet.

"Is it sensible to poke about for strange beings in space while we blindly exterminate those about us?" he asked. "It is said that not much more than half the organisms on earth have yet been described. As one who has several times discovered insects new to science in his own back yard, I can believe this."

In graduate school, at the University of California, Berkeley, Wagner devoted himself to ghost moths. Holdovers from the days of the dinosaurs, ghost moths exhibit many curious behaviors. "When they fly, their wings flap around independently, which is a really ancient, uncoördinated mode of flight," he explained. Males of some ghost-moth species perform a sort of aerial cha-cha as a prelude to sex. Others have specialized legs loaded with come-hither chemicals. Much remains to be learned about ghost moths, and Wagner would probably have kept right on studying them had it not been for an ecological disaster.

Back in the eighteen-sixties, in a bungled attempt to establish a silk business, a Frenchman named Étienne Léopold Trouvelot imported gypsy moths from Europe to Massachusetts. Some of Trouvelot's moths, which are now less offensively referred to as spongy moths, got loose. Their eggs hatched into spongy-moth caterpillars, which proceeded to defoliate much of New England. By the nineteen-nineties, spongy moths had pushed as far as Virginia, and their caterpillars were wreaking havoc in Shenandoah National Park. The Forest Service wanted to strike back with insecticide, but there was concern that a lot of other moths and butterflies would be killed off in the process. Researchers set up experimental plots in the Blue Ridge Mountains, sprayed some of them, and left the others alone. Then they gathered from the plots all the caterpillars they could find and sent them to Wagner at UConn's main campus, in Storrs.

"The first week, they sent six thousand caterpillars," Wagner recalled. During the next couple of weeks, more shipments arrived, until the caterpillars numbered thirteen thousand.

As anyone who has ever witnessed a spongy-moth infestation or just read Eric Carle knows, caterpillars eat voraciously. Many are picky, though, and will consume only certain plants. Wagner scrambled to staff his lepidopteran nursery. "If you could push a shopping cart, you could get a job," he recalled.

Among the thousands of larvae sent by the Forest Service were lots that Wagner didn't recognize. He called around to various colleagues, who weren't much help. At that point, there was no definitive guide to the caterpillars of eastern North America to consult. Just to have a way to refer to their charges, Wagner and his assistants started making up nicknames. A particularly colorful caterpillar became known as the Dazzler. Another, with a groove on the tip of its rearmost segment, they dubbed Plumber's Butt.

For Wagner, the experience was eye-opening. Every butterfly or moth was once a larva. And yet there was a lack of basic information on caterpillars—what they looked like, what they ate, how they got through the winter. Taxonomically speaking, they were an undiscovered country.

It was about 10 A.M. when Wagner and I left the bush by the Devils River and headed northwest, deeper into the Chihuahuan Desert. It had rained a few weeks earlier—this was the reason Wagner was making the trip—and the foliage was surprisingly green. Every so often, Wagner would spot an interesting plant and screech off the highway. He would pull out his white nylon beating sheet, which was stretched across a frame, like a kite, and thump away at the vegetation. Anything he liked the looks of went into a plastic vial, and then into the canvas collecting bag he wore slung over his shoulder. With all the stopping and starting, we didn't cover much distance, even though, when we were driving, it was often at more than ninety miles an hour. Finally, at almost 9 P.M., we pulled into the town of Alpine, home of Sul Ross State University, where Wagner had an appointment scheduled for the following morning.

Wagner likes to say "It takes a village," by which he means that no one person, no matter how ardent, can beat every bush. During the last decade, he has built up—or, you might say, collected—an extensive network of helpers. Some have professional training in entomology; others are amateurs he has persuaded to keep an eye out for strange-looking larvae. Still others own ranches where rare species might lurk, or know people who do. Not infrequently, his collaborators FedEx him their discoveries.

I ended up meeting—and, in some cases, staying in the homes of—several members of Wagner's Texas network. They included his friends by the Devils River, Tracy and Dave Barker, both herpetologists.

"Dave's good at enlisting people," Tracy told me, referring to Wagner. "He gets to these people, and then all of a sudden they have all these jars in their kitchens."

"Dave is the one person I know who will always get back to you," Delmar Cain, a retired lawyer, told me. "Plus, he will give you fifteen jobs in the meantime—things that you need to be on the lookout for."

"Dave has contaminated everybody," a third member of the network, Michael Powell, a West Texas botanist, said, sighing.

On the way to Alpine, Wagner had told me that he was "courting" a friend of Powell's named Kelsey Wogan, by which he meant nothing romantic. (As a gift for her, he had brought along an extra beating sheet.) We met up with Wogan in the herbarium on the Sul Ross campus. She was carrying a basket filled with ziplock bags. Wagner opened the first ziplock and fished out a caterpillar.

"I've never seen anything like this before!" he exclaimed, reaching for the loupe that dangled from a cord around his neck.

To the naked eye, the caterpillar appeared gray with black splotches. Viewed at ten times magnification, it was twenty times weirder. Instead of gray, it was a dusty rose, with stripes of salmon dots that ran along its sides and met up above its many eyes. (Most caterpillars have twelve eyes, six on each side.) The black splotches were raised, like tiny hillocks, and covered in even tinier white stipples.

"This is super cool!" Wagner said. He

didn't even know what genus the caterpillar belonged to, which meant that it, too, might prove to be some kind of first.

Wogan passed him another plastic bag. The caterpillar in this one was, relatively speaking, gigantic—nearly the size of a cocktail sausage. It was a velvety bronze speckled with turquoise. To me, it seemed even cooler than the first, but Wagner immediately recognized it as the caterpillar of a common butterfly, the two-tailed swallowtail, which made it scientifically uninteresting. Perhaps sensing my disappointment, he pinched the caterpillar's thorax. Two tentacles emerged from a hidden compartment, along with some goo that smelled like vomit. This, he explained, was a defensive strategy—a trick the creature used to ward off birds. Wogan seemed suitably disgusted. She handed over more bags, filled with more caterpillars.

From a caterpillar's perspective, humans are boring. The young they squeeze out of their bodies are just miniature versions of themselves, with all the limbs and appendages they'll ever have. As they mature, babies get bigger and stronger and hairier, but that's about it.

Caterpillars, for their part, are continually reinventing themselves. They emerge from tiny, jewel-like eggs and for their first meal often eat their own egg cases. Once they reach a certain size, they sprout a second head, just behind the first. They then wriggle free of their old skin, the way a diver might wriggle out of a wetsuit. (In the process, the old head drops off.) In the course of their development, they will complete this exercise three, four, in some species sixteen times, often trying out a new look along the way. The spicebush swallowtail, for example, which is found throughout the eastern U.S., emerges from its egg mottled in black and white. This color scheme allows it to pass itself off as a bird dropping. After its third molt, as a so-called fourth instar, it turns green (or brown), with two yellow-and-black spots on its head. The spots, which look uncannily like a pair of eyes, enable the swallowtail to pretend it's a snake.

After running through its allotment of instars, a caterpillar ceases to be itself and becomes a pupa. It sheds its skin one last time and develops a hardened shell. Inside this shell, its body dissolves. Then, from bundles of cells known as imaginal disks, a new body takes form. Some disks develop into legs, some wings, some genitalia, and so on. The creature that emerges retains almost nothing of its juvenile self except, weirdly, its memories.

As a way of life, this radical, whole-body transformation is ancient. It arose some three hundred and fifty million years ago, during the Carboniferous period. How, exactly, the process evolved is still debated, but it has proved wildly popular. Not only moths and butterflies undergo complete metamorphosis; so, too, do beetles, flies, wasps, fleas, and lacewings.

When we'd first set out on our collecting expedition, Wagner had issued a warning. There wasn't going to be much time on the trip for sleeping or eating. "We can do two meals a day," he had said. "But I don't think we'll ever see three." In fact, as we tore around West Texas, we hadn't skipped many meals. But Wagner, at least, was staying up later and later. The more caterpillars he collected, the longer it took to care for them.

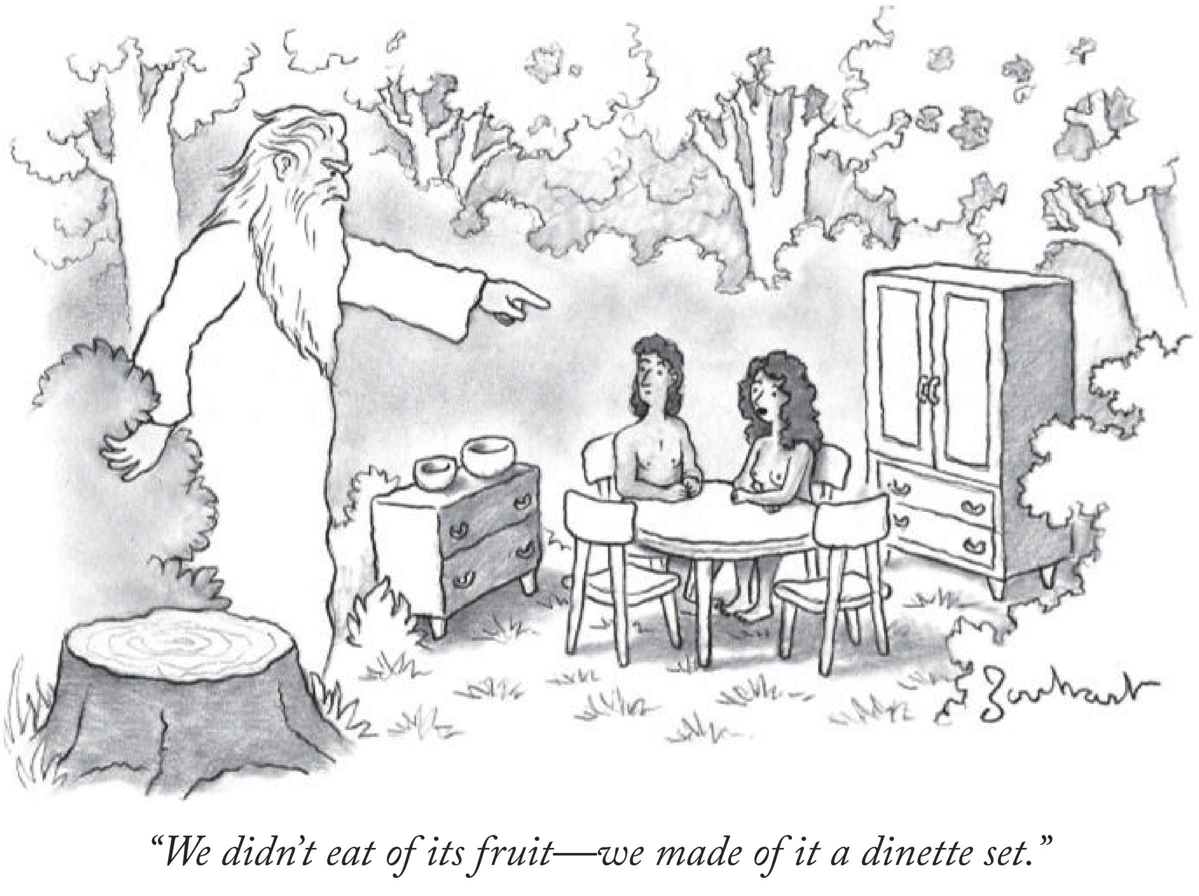
One night in Alpine, I volunteered to help. By this point, we were five days out, and Wagner's travelling menagerie had grown to include some seventy hungry caterpillars. His plastic vials were arranged in rows on the nightstand of his hotel room. He pulled several bagfuls of leaves from the room's mini-fridge.

Any animal that eats voraciously poops voluminously. The first task of the evening involved cleaning the shit—or, more politely, frass—out of the vials, a practice Wagner referred to as "mucking the stalls." He handed me a paper plate. I was to dump the contents of a vial onto the plate, swab out the container, and then put the caterpillar back inside, along with a fresh sprig of its host plant. As we were mucking the stalls, Wagner realized that one of the caterpillars Wogan had found had gone missing. It was another cocktail-sausage-size creature, midnight black in color. We searched around on the floor for a while but couldn't find it. Then I stood up to fetch something and felt a hideous squish underfoot.

"The caterpillar gods give and they taketh away," Wagner pronounced, wiping the black gunk off the rug. He tried to console me by claiming the caterpillar had been a relatively common one.

On top of all the mucking and feeding, each addition to his collection had to be logged, with a note made of precisely where it had been found and on what plant. Then—most time-consuming of all—it had to be photographed. Moths and butterflies make handsome specimens that can retain their looks for centuries. Caterpillars, sadly, don't last. Pickled in alcohol, they become soggy and discolored; unpickled, they rot. Photographs are pretty much the only way to preserve them.

Wagner treats his subjects like so many many-legged Christy Turlingtons. He poses them on sprigs that he attaches to a little stand, which he arranges in front



"We didn't eat of its fruit—we made of it a dinette set."

of a green background. Then he leans in with a huge macro lens. Wagner confessed to me that he wants his caterpillars to be hungry during a photo shoot; that way, he can catch them in what's called their resting posture. (At rest, a caterpillar colored like a twig will stick out at an angle, just as a real twig would do.) Caterpillars don't see very well; probably they can detect light and dark, but not much else. Nevertheless, Wagner likes to capture them "looking" at the camera.

"Eye contact is critical," he told me. "People are going to connect to that."

The night of the squish, I hung around for a while to watch Wagner shoot and reshoot that day's finds. He was wearing his usual field uniform—jeans, sneakers, a short-sleeved button-down shirt, and a cap printed with the logo of Caterpillar, Inc. (The cap, he told me, was "tongue-in-cheek.") He was so much bigger than his models that when I took a picture of him taking a picture of them it looked like a man photographing nothing.

Seen in Wagner's extreme-closeup shots, the caterpillars were, once again, spectacular. One, which Wagner had found on a pine tree, was gray, with uneven dark patches that looked like shadows and made the caterpillar appear to have the texture of pine bark. Another, which he had found on an oak leaf, was dark green with a white stripe down its back that mimicked the leaf's midrib, and light-green stripes that mimicked its veins. "I think a lot of people find insects repugnant or ugly," Wagner told me. "I can't see that."

Around midnight, I decided it was time to turn in. Wagner, I learned the next morning, had stayed up for three more hours. "The only reason I go to bed is so I don't mess up the next day," he said.

There are roughly sixty-five hundred species of mammals, nine thousand species of amphibians, and eleven thousand species of birds. These are what people tend to think of when they picture the world's biodiversity. But the planet's real diversity lies mostly beneath our regard. The largest family of beetles, the Curculionidae, commonly known as weevils, contains some sixty thousand described species; another beetle family, the Tenebrionidae, comprises twenty thousand species. It is estimated that in one family of parasitic wasps, the Ichneumonidae, there are nearly a hundred thousand species, which is more than there are of vertebrates of all kinds. (Ichneumonids inject their eggs into the larvae of other insects. Darwin adduced their existence as a powerful argument against intelligent design; he could not, he wrote, imagine a "beneficent and omnipotent God" purposely creating such a fiendish creature.) There are, in fact, so many insect species—at least two million and possibly as many as ten million—that Robert May, an Australian physicist turned theoretical ecologist, once joked, "To a good approximation, all species are insects!"

In keeping with their variety, insects play a vital role in virtually every terrestrial ecosystem. Roughly three-quarters of the world's flowering plants depend on insects for pollination. Insects are also crucial seed dispersers; many plants stud their seeds with tiny treats to entice ants to carry them off. And they're key decomposers. (When a person dies, blowflies arrive on the scene within minutes; in warm weather, blowfly maggots can eat through most of a corpse within a week.)

Legions of other creatures, meanwhile, depend on insects for food. Insectivorous mammals include hedgehogs, shrews, and most species of bats. Just about all amphibians consume insects, as do many species of reptiles and freshwater fish. Lots of birds rely on insects, particularly during breeding season: before they fledge, a clutch of young chickadees will consume as many as six thousand caterpillars. Collectively, insects transfer more energy from plants to animals than any other group. They are the solder that holds food chains together.

This vital work is, at least by *Homo sapiens*, underappreciated. To the extent that we attend to insects, usually it's to those that irk us. If there's a moral to Wagner's work, it is that, instead of arrogantly blundering along, we ought to pause and look more closely. What we'd discover is one marvel after another.

The caterpillar of the silver-spotted skipper, I learned from "Caterpillars of Eastern North America," uses an air-gun-like appendage in its anus to send its frass pellets soaring. This practice, known as "fecal firing," discombobulates parasitic wasps. The silvery blue caterpillar possesses a "nectary organ" that dispenses a sugary liquid; ants attracted to the liquid are enlisted as bodyguards. The camouflaged looper confuses potential predators by chewing off bits of plant matter, like petals, and attaching them to its back. When threatened, the catalpa sphinx caterpillar spews out green goo and thrashes around violently. The walnut sphinx caterpillar, too, is a thrasher; instead of spitting up goo, it whistles through its air holes, or spiracles. The lace-capped caterpillar is colored to look like a piece of dying vegetation; when it eats out a section of a leaf, it fills the gap with its body, in ef-

COWBOYS LOST IN CONVERSATION

fect becoming the damage it has caused.

One day, toward the end of our collecting trip, Wagner and I pulled off the road a few miles from the Mexican border. As usual, Wagner laid out a beating sheet and started to whack at the vegetation. By this point, I was getting to be a pretty experienced whacker myself. I was also getting better at distinguishing caterpillars from the bits of plant debris that fell onto the beating sheet Wagner had loaned me. (The key difference is that caterpillars move.) After laying into a plant called devil's claw, I found a small, unexceptional-looking green caterpillar, which, viewed under a hand lens, still appeared to me to be small and green and unexceptional. I showed it to Wagner, who immediately noticed something special about it. The caterpillar was covered in minute spines, but, he explained, it lacked the markings common to similarly spiny caterpillars from the genus *Heliothis.*

"I think your little green thing may be significant," he told me. He put it in a vial and said that he was going to send it off for genetic analysis. Depending on the results, it could get its own entry in "Caterpillars of Western North America."

Around the time that Wagner turned sixty, in 2016, he started to think about retiring and, possibly, moving out West. But then another, much bigger ecological crisis intervened—what's become known, perhaps prematurely, perhaps not, as the insect apocalypse.

The first sign of the "apocalypse" came from the city of Krefeld, in western Germany. For decades, members of the Krefeld Entomological Society had been trapping insects in protected areas near the city. Every bug they caught they weighed and preserved in bottles of alcohol.

In 2013, society members returned to two sites they had first sampled in 1989. To their surprise, the total mass of the insects they caught was just a fraction of what it had been the first time around. When they resampled other areas, the results were much the same. They passed on their data to a team of scientists, who wrote up their conclusions in a paper that ran in PLOS One in 2017. In less than thirty years, "total flying insect biomass" in the areas sampled had dropped by three-quarters, the paper said—suggesting that the entire flying-insect community had been "decimated."

Other papers filled with equally bleak statistics soon followed. A study of the Upper Mississippi River and the Western Lake Erie Basin found that the number of mayflies emerging from the two waterways had dropped by more than half just since 2012. (Mayflies can form such large swarms that they are visible on radar.) An analysis of data collected each summer in Ohio showed that butterfly sightings in the state had declined by a third in little more than two decades. Researchers working in the Hubbard Brook Experimental Forest, in New Hampshire's White Mountains, discovered that the number of beetles in the forest had fallen by more than eighty per cent since the mid-nineteen-seventies, and that some beetle families had disappeared entirely.

As the papers piled up, a countermovement took shape. Some researchers argued that there was a bias toward doom. Studies that found no particular trend in insect numbers were less interesting than those that suggested a crisis, and therefore were less likely to get published. Other researchers pushed back. Even if insects were doing O.K. in some places, they said, the outlines of the problem were clear and the stakes too high to wait.

"If we do not take action now to address declines in insect abundance and diversity, we will very likely face problems . . . that will make many previous challenges faced by human civilization seem tame by comparison," a trio of researchers led by Matt Forister, of the University of Nevada, Reno, wrote.

From his own experience, Wagner knew that many species that used to be common had become rare. He had published a paper in 2012 titled "Moth Decline in the Northeastern United States"; it noted that several large, showy moths, like the promethea silkmoth, which had been easy to find when he arrived at UConn, in the late nineteen-eighties, had since vanished. The more data that came in the more concerned he became.

In the fall of 2019, Wagner organized a session called "Insect Decline in the Anthropocene" for the annual meeting of the Entomological Society of America, which was held that year in St. Louis. It turned out to be one of the conference's best-attended sessions. Most of the speakers, including two of the authors of the Krefeld paper, offered dire warnings; a few, though, warned against being too dire.

I first met Wagner not long after that session, at a Christmas party where I was also introduced to several giant cockroaches. The party was held in the entomology offices of the American Museum of Natural History. That evening, as we snacked on fried crickets, Wagner told me, "For the first time, I think people are really worried about ecosystem services and all the things insects do to sustain the planet."

Last month, I met up with Wagner again at the Natural History Museum. He had received a grant from the National Science Foundation to organize a five-year research program on insect decline, and the museum was hosting a conference to kick off the effort. As if to underscore the urgency of the situation, on the first day of the meeting a new paper on the status of insects appeared. The paper, by researchers at the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, found that the number of flying insects using a key migration corridor between China and the Korean Peninsula had dropped significantly in just over fifteen years, and that the losses were higher among species that prey on other insects. It suggested that food webs were starting to break down. "Active conservation of insect communities is pivotal," the study concluded.

Much of the conference took place in a wood-panelled room presided over by a portrait of Teddy Roosevelt. Participants included experts on, among many other groups, bees, dragonflies, katydids, and dung beetles. Wagner opened the gathering by saying he was there "because the bugs demanded that I do this."

Some of the presentations were held over Zoom, with all the attendant technical glitches. Matt Forister talked about declining butterfly counts in California's Central Valley and, even more worrying, at high elevations in the Sierra Nevada. Greg Lamarre, a scientist at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, reported that insect populations on Panama's Barro Colorado Island appeared to be stable. Dan Janzen, a tropical ecologist who teaches part of the year at the University of Pennsylvania, spoke from his home in northwestern

Costa Rica; behind him hung plastic bags filled with what I assumed were specimens. In the sixty years that he'd been studying the region, he said, insect numbers had fallen catastrophically.

"When conservationists speak about tropical forests that have been heavily hunted, they call them 'empty forests,'" he observed. "What we're seeing is an empty forest."

Wagner told me that the heterogeneity of the data coming in had convinced him that insects, rather than suffering from one particular thing, were suffering from everything. "If the stressors are the things we understand—such as lights, pesticides, loss of habitat, climate change, pollution, exotic species, and the industrialization of agriculture—I think that makes perfect sense," he said. The main threat in the American West, he believes, is drought driven by warming.

"Insects are all surface area and no volume," he explained. "So they don't have the capacity to store water. And they're additionally challenged, because their respiratory system differs from ours. We take in air through our mouths and deliver oxygen through our blood. But insect blood doesn't carry oxygen. So they have to have these breathing tubes that penetrate every single cell group in their body, and that compounds their rate of water loss." Insects endemic to dry areas must, of course, have ways of dealing with drought, or they wouldn't exist. Some moths, for example, can wait out a dry spell underground, as pupae, in a state close to suspended animation. But even they have their limits. At a certain point, with no rain, the pupae expire. Wagner said he felt he was in a race against aridification.

"We're going to solve this climate crisis," he told me. "We're going to decarbonize. But it's going to be too late for a lot of the organisms I love."

On the second day of the meeting, everyone put on a safety vest and hard hat and trooped over to the museum's newest addition, under construction on Columbus Avenue. The building, which is slated to open later this year, will house the Solomon Family Insectarium, where live cockroaches, beetles, and leaf-cutter ants will be on display. On the walk over, I fell into conversation with one of Wagner's former graduate students, Piotr Naskrecki, an entomologist who works in Gorongosa National Park, in Mozambique.

"Dave has been my hero and my inspiration pretty much my whole adult life," Naskrecki told me. "He has this ability to reignite my belief that what I'm doing matters. One example comes from when I was working on my Ph.D. I was doing a side project on the phylogeny of hummingbird flower mites, which live in the nostrils of hummingbirds. I showed him the results, and I kind of wanted him to tell me, 'Don't waste your time.' But instead he told me, 'This is fantastic!'"

Although it was a Saturday, the insectarium was humming with construction workers when we arrived. Giant metal flowers rose from the floor, and a twenty-foot-tall amber-colored honeycomb, made from some kind of resin, hung from the ceiling. The place was clearly designed to inspire joy and wonder in children (and in whoever might be accompanying them). But I could see from the writing on the wall that the messaging was serious. "Insects appear to be declining globally, in ways we are only beginning to understand," a newly painted placard said.

As it happened, the museum was also showing a temporary exhibit on insects, this one consisting entirely of photographs. Each image was an extreme closeup of a specimen from the museum's vast insect collection, with an emphasis on species that are endangered or already gone. During one of the breaks in the meeting, I wandered around the exhibit, which was nearly empty, though the rest of the museum was mobbed. Two boys were fiddling with the dials on a display monitor that allowed viewers to zoom in even further on the closeups. I heard one of the kids say to the other that he wanted to see the bug's "butthole." The boys' parents exchanged knowing glances.

One of the photos showed an hourglass drone fly, blown up to the size of a Doberman. Each lens on the fly's two compound eyes was visible, as were the three ocelli on the top of its head: these "little eyes," it is thought, help the fly orient itself in space. Hourglass drone flies, the label noted, "were once common throughout much of northern North America, but they have nearly disappeared."

A second photo captured the San Joaquin Valley giant flower-loving fly in profile, with its long, pointy proboscis hanging down like a scabbard. The fly, once thought to be extinct, was rediscovered in two spots in the nineteen-nineties; then, in 2006, one of the populations was obliterated by development. Probably there are just a few hundred individuals left, in a single dune east of Bakersfield, California.

Another photo showed a Rocky Mountain locust with its hind legs extended like ski poles. Rocky Mountain locusts were once so numerous that their swarms blocked the sun. A particularly immense swarm, in 1875, was estimated to stretch over almost two hundred thousand square miles and to comprise three trillion individuals. Thirty years later, the locust was extinct. This story, from trillions to none, is a lot like that of the passenger pigeon, which also disappeared in the early twentieth century. No one knows how the locust was eliminated; probably the cause was farming. "As settlers moved into Native lands in the West, they plowed and planted over the insects' nesting areas," the photo's label said.

In total, there were photos of forty insects on display. All of them were of adults. It occurred to me that, once again, larvae were getting short shrift.

When Wagner started out in entomology, the only way to be sure what species a caterpillar belonged to was to raise it through metamorphosis and see what emerged. Even then, there were no guarantees: many moths and butterflies look a lot alike, apparently even to each other. To guard against mistakes at mating time, lepidoptera have evolved some of the most elaborate genitalia in the animal world, and to guard against mistaken I.D.s lepidopterists often had to resort to dissecting a specimen's sex organs under a microscope. (A famous story about Vladimir Nabokov, who served as the curator of lepidoptera at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology in the nineteen-forties, has him announcing to a group of visitors, "Excuse me, I must go play with my genitalia.")

These days, professionals have better options than genital dissection. When Wagner wants to know the identity of a caterpillar he's caught, he euthanizes the insect by injecting it with alcohol. Then he cuts off one of its prolegs—these are the stubby appendages located behind caterpillars' six front, or "true," legs—and sends the tissue off to a lab in Ontario. From this tissue, the lab sequences a section of a gene known as cytochrome c oxidase subunit 1, or CO1.

All animals possess a copy of CO1—many copies, actually—which is critical to cellular respiration. But each species' version is slightly different from every other's, so the gene can be used as a kind of taxonomic fingerprint. (What's known as DNA bar coding usually involves an analysis of CO1.)

"The only reason you're here is because your father is Tony 'the Triangle' Hernandez."

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A few months after we returned from Texas, Wagner got word that the results for the samples he'd sent off from our trip were in. These would tell him what species the caterpillars we'd gathered had belonged to and prove that several were new to science, or, perhaps, do the opposite. Wagner spoke of "unwrapping" the results with the eagerness of a kid looking forward to Christmas. He promised to wait to look at them until we could go through them together, over Zoom. Later, he confessed to me that he had peeked at some of the data early.

The first sequence we unwrapped belonged to the "little green thing" I'd found, which Wagner had led me to believe might be "significant." The caterpillar was basically a pest species, related to a corn earworm, and not significant at all. I hadn't given the green thing much thought—in fact, I couldn't quite remember what it looked like. Nevertheless, it was a blow.

Kelsey Wogan's caterpillar, by contrast, turned out to be a real find. It was a genetic match with a very rare tan-colored moth known only from two specimens at the Smithsonian. (The moth is so rare it has never been formally described.) Wogan was probably the only person ever to have collected one of the moth's rose-colored larvae, and Wagner was the only person ever to have photographed it. "You can't do much better than that," he said.

In among the results were several more hits. The suspected *Ursia furtiva* caterpillar did, indeed, turn out to be an *Ursia furtiva*. A bright-yellow number that Wagner had collected near the Mexican border turned out to belong to another extremely rare species, *Neoilliberis arizonica;* probably it, too, was the first caterpillar of its kind ever collected. An unremarkable green specimen Wagner had found outside Alpine, the genetic analysis showed, belonged to a species new to science. Another unremarkable caterpillar—a tiny brown inchworm—represented not just a new species but possibly a new genus. There was also a surprise new species Wagner asked me not to reveal much about. This was to prevent other entomologists from trying to describe it before he had a chance to.

"You could say, 'There was one exceptionally interesting discovery that Dave made me embargo,'" Wagner suggested during one of our Zoom sessions.

"The more you know, the more fun this is," he said during another.

Wagner once told me, matter-of-factly, that he had never experienced a period of gloom or depression. Apparently, this included the time he spent going to school with kids who threw rocks at him, as well as the years he has devoted to pondering the "insect apocalypse." During the week I spent with him in Texas, I never saw him get rattled or annoyed, even though one day he sat on (and shattered) his iPhone and another day he had to skip an elaborate expedition he'd planned because a colleague reminded him, a few hours before the deadline, that he hadn't filed a student recommendation. At the conference at the Natural History Museum, he never seemed down, even when the presentations appeared to leave no other option. I wasn't quite sure what to make of this. Was his optimism simply a matter of temperament, or did it have something to do with looking at life through a loupe?

"To a person attuned to smaller creatures," Wagner's former professor Howard Ensign Evans once wrote, "there is no corner of nature not full of excitement, not rich in unsolved problems."

The Earth, Evans added, "is a good place to live." ♦

FALSE STAR

Sterling HolyWhiteMountain

LOKOSH (JOSHUA D. HINSON)

As we know, there is a long and storied history of a certain kind of dealing on the part of Uncle Sam with his indians, and so there have also been times when America wakes up after a long weekend of terror only to rediscover its morals and decide a renewed effort is in order, and though I would not go so far as to say these efforts have been particularly . . . genuine . . . what did come from one such gesture was this thing people in my part of indian country—which is, indisputably, the best and most beautiful part, the Blackfeet Reservation—called a claim check, which in the end was money you might get when you turned eighteen. The check came from a land claim, settled with the Feds decades before I was born. As far back as I could remember, I had heard discussion of claim checks. There was something elemental about it: the talk circled round in a seasonal way. People joked about being claim-check rich and then later laughed about being claim-check broke. They bought claim-check cars, got claim-check drunk, and some got claim-check married. That's how it was for us for a long time, until the money ran out. The Feds are never more careful with limits and end dates on their moral awakenings than they are with us, such is the concern that we might steal the whole country right out from under them. Then we were back to where we were before, a bunch of broke skins way out on the Northern Plains, teasing one another. So this is a story about how I got my part of the money, how I spent it, and the people in my life at that time, such as Big Man, who raised me, and of course June, who I loved before any other, and who has been gone now longer than any of us had the chance to know her when she was alive.

It was near the end of April, the morning of my eighteenth birthday, and I had asked Big Man how I would get the check.

Well, he said. There is no check.

How's that? I said.

I don't know, he said. Maybe I already spent it. I can't really remember.

I waited to see what was going on, and while he patted his pockets as if he were searching for something I kept very still, hoping it was not true but also knowing it was probably not true. He stopped and nodded toward the front door and said to go to the truck. We would go to Blood Creek to take care of things. I didn't know what that meant. On the way there, after a long time of not talking, he said, You know, I got that money once.

Yeah? I said.

Yup, he said. In '62. Your uncle was younger than you are now. That was the first payout.

He stopped there. I hoped he might say more but he didn't, which did not surprise me. Beyond the truck the Plains went out to the horizon every which way but west, where they met the mountains that made up the backbone of our homeland, a long line of peaks strung together that went as far north and south as you could see. That day they were still white from snow, winter having only recently ceded its hold, and they seemed very far away and bright under the high sun. On the way to Blood Creek there were occasional grain elevators and there were dirt roads that broke off from the highway and angled out into the bright distance, and in the midst of all this I thought vaguely about what I might do with the money. No words, really, just moments of imagination like movie clips, and all the feelings that go with them. Mostly it was girls that ran through my big head. I had a deep and abiding belief that the money would in some way solve the problem of the girl. I would go to Paradise Falls and get a car—some kind, I didn't know which, I was not that kind of young man—and then . . . girls. Probably more than one! I would get ass, as the guys who got ass would say. Don't ask me how I thought this would happen. Maybe they would be lined up. Who knew how a guy with a new ride and some money in his pocket might be received. That's just how it was to me. That is how things were supposed to work, laid out and simple like a route on a map.

My cousin Roy LaForge's mom had spent his claim money. I can still see him standing in senior hall, mad as hell because it was his eighteenth birthday and there was nothing coming to him. Jim Three Suns had asked him if he was gonna tear it up claim style that weekend and would he spot us a twenty so we could get lunch across the street at the Snack Shack.

We gotta get somma them double cheeseburgers, Jim said. He was rubbing his hands together.

Well, Roy said, and slammed his locker and flipped us the bird as he walked away. We had a good laugh over that. Later we found out that his mom had taken the check and spent it a few weeks after he was born, leaving him with his gram and going on a ripper. For those of us born in time to receive a claim but not old enough to handle it ourselves, the money was given to our parents or grandparents or whoever it was that was raising us, and they could do what they wanted with it. In the case of people like Roy's mom they spent it, maybe all of it that very day, maybe they took a drive to Blood Creek and cashed the check and then decided to gamble a few bucks at the keno machines at Diamond Lily's and then maybe they decided it was a nice afternoon, maybe they said, Hell, I am going to keep going. Why not! And then they were on the freeway and a few hours later there it was, Paradise Falls, rising up from the Plains like El Dorado itself. Then they were checking into a hotel. They were saying, I'm only gonna spend a little bit of this and then put the rest away for my kid for when they get older. They were at the keno machines downstairs in the small casino just off the lobby and then maybe they were having a drink, just one drink, and then it was another—but it would definitely be the last. Then they were talking to someone else from home who happened to be there—Paradise is full of Blackfeet on the weekends—and then they were bullshitting, they were laughing about something they both knew, an old story from many years before, when they were in high school and you could hardly get off the reservation. Do you remember it? Nobody even had the money to go anywhere, and now here we are! And then later, as both the day and the money dwindle, they decide to have just one more drink and then off upstairs to bed—or maybe not. Maybe just one more! And that is how it went for some people, they grew up and hit the much ballyhooed age and they got nothing, because two hundred and sixteen months earlier it was their mom or dad or auntie in Paradise Falls, fucked up on too many hotel-bar gin-and-tonics, snoring belly down in a third-floor room with their shoes still on.

There were others, though, like Big Man, who did not go to Blood Creek or Paradise or Copperton or Highland or Industry or any of these places that were not particularly fond of indians but had no problem with indian money. There were those who put the check in a savings account and let it wax through that mysterious process called interest. Who let the money become part of the imaginations of their children and grandchildren as they grew up.

Just wait till I get that claim check, someone might say.

Ima be rich then.

Gonna live like a fuckin *white* man!

The calm of a bank is quite a thing. If you don't think too much you might believe it has always been this way, these quiet transactions around money. It was not long ago, though, that money was moved by whipped horses and coal-fired trains from vault to vault all over the West. Men with mustaches, men who wore vests and tracked the movement of time on pocket watches, men for whom the world was no more than a series of numbers. Men who believed there was nothing that could not be turned into money. Men who would in fact give their lives for it. Whereas for the grandparents of my grandparents, those ones here who first laid eyes on money and had no idea what it was, I imagine they could not understand what these pale men were so loony about. It must have been the way it will be when those little gray people finally land on the White House lawn and let everyone know they have come to *introduce* a new way of living.

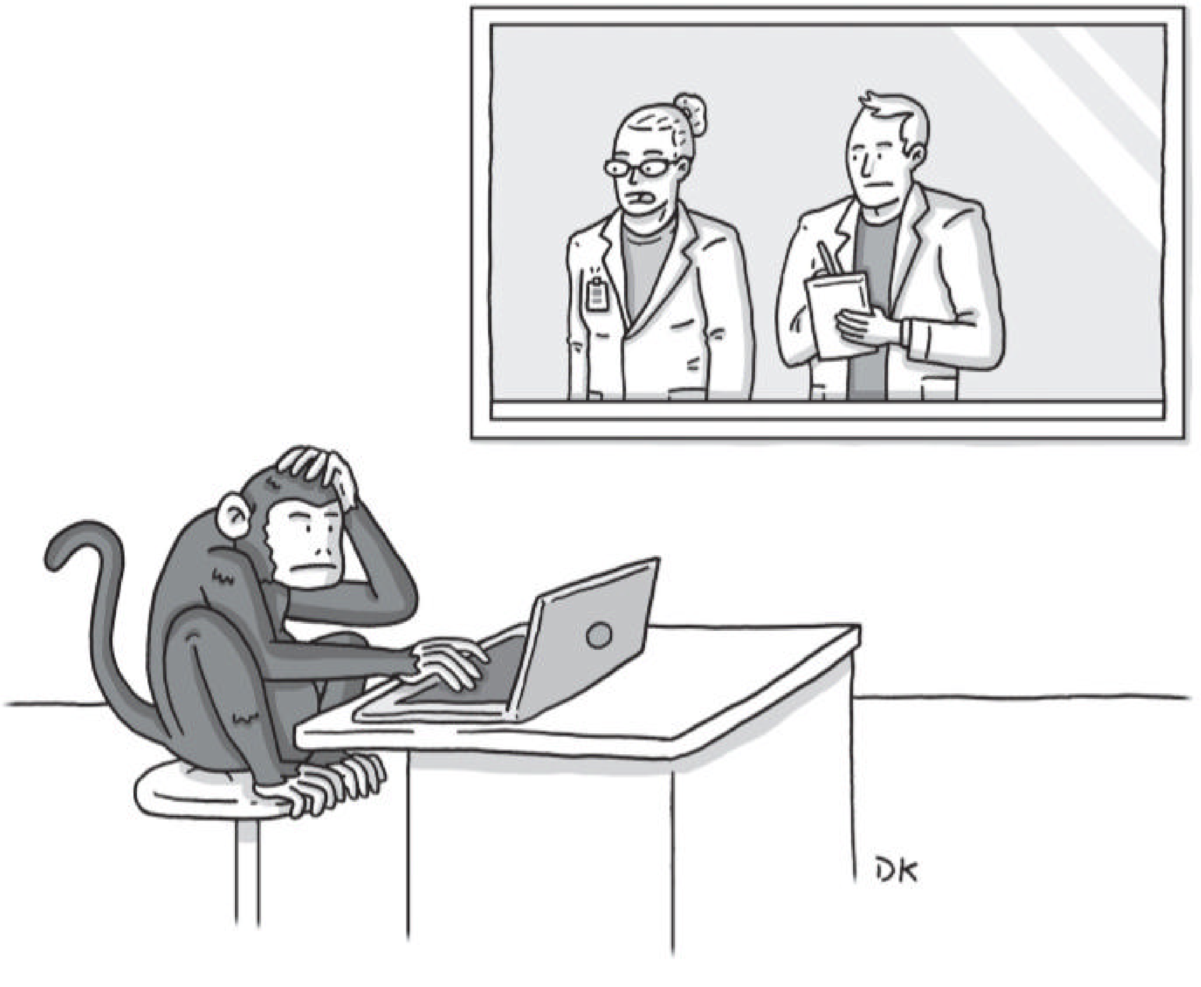
The banker was a white woman with very blue eyes and very blond hair. She looked at my grandpa's I.D. and said, How are you today, Mr. False Star . . . Boy?

That's my name, he said. Don't wear it out. He smiled. He was always entertained by his own jokes. He nodded at me and said, This guy here needs to open a account with that money.

What money is that? she said.

That money I put in here for him a ways back, he said. It wasn't you I gave it to, it was some other woman, she had brown hair. She was a way bigger than you.

The woman had no idea what Big Man was talking about. Her eyes seemed extra blue and wide in her confusion. Another banker came over to help, an older woman with gray hair and a face that recalled a horse. Pretty soon Big Man was annoyed with both of them and was starting to take that tone I knew too well. I determined that I would sit things out in the waiting area. I looked at magazines for a while. There were a lot of white people in them and a few Black people and one Asian guy who looked like a nice guy, the kind of guy you would give your money to. He had a good smile. Everyone had such good smiles. After a while we were led to a desk, where I answered some questions and signed a few papers and was handed a checkbook and a temporary A.T.M. card, and I felt as big as I had ever felt in my life and maybe ever would.



"This is a thousand monkeys collaborating on a single Google Doc trying to reproduce Shakespeare."

A few weeks later Big Man drove me and June down to Paradise Falls. We left early because we were running on Big Man time and he was always up and ready for the day by 5:30. The sun cast the houses and the potholed roads of La Fleur in a pristine and brutal light. When we got to June's she wasn't ready so I waited at her door in the early cold and blew on my hands. Big Man was reading the paper he had picked up before I got out of bed, and he was smoking, of course, frowning, wearing the same blue King Ropes hat he always did, his glasses darkened by the daylight. When June came out she looked kind of rugged. She had real wicked oossii eyes; she could barely open them, like she had rolled out of bed only a few minutes before, but she was very pretty to me anyway, and I told her she looked good and she told me to shut up. It's too early to be talking, she said. I had asked June to come with me because she had asked the same of me a month before, when she got her own money and took her own trip to Paradise Falls. I had kind of assumed this was how it would go and maybe she had, too. We had been friends for a long time and done a lot of things together by then. It made sense.

There had been something about her even when she was young, not a woman or a young woman but still mostly a girl, something that made men, older men, pay attention. She changed when they looked at her and the more they looked at her the more she changed and I had been around and borne witness to this and had myself in the process been altered. She became like light run through the jewels of their eyes, and what she was on the other side was new and bold and somehow older. Boyfriends, guys our age, went in and out of her life with regularity, and though none lasted long she was not overly cruel with them. With the older men it was different. Her makeup got heavier. There was a darkness about her, and I can recall with great clarity what it was like to see her that way. She dressed like she wanted something, and I have no idea where she learned it, because I did not see any other girls doing what she did. She batted those men around on the late nights of a weekend and on Monday morning before class told me stories about laughing at them when they said how they felt about her, even making some of them cry, which disgusted her. He cried like a little bitch. That was how she might say it. And she would laugh. Those experiences were funny to her, and she would confide about them in a careless way, and while she talked about how she wrecked these men and how they would beg her to come back anyway—then, when her focus was far away, I was free to look at her and watch how she moved her hands and see her face change and I didn't have to concern myself with her noticing me, she was so taken up with whatever she was talking about.

On weekends June and my other friends would often go out and party but usually I did not. Parties were loud things and at some point in the night a guy would tear off his shirt and try to fight anyone he could and it was only a matter of time before that anyone was me and I did not feel any need to mix it with some drunk prick. Instead I would sit on the couch for a while watching late-night TV, Big Man already long asleep down the hall with his door shut. Then I would go to my room and read whatever fantasy book I was reading at the time and I would do that until my eyes hurt and then go to sleep but if somewhere along the way there was a scene with a woman who was described in such a way that made it clear she was hot I would get hooked on her and then I was kind of in the book and maybe meeting her at some mountain lodge whose upper walls were adorned with the skulls of antlered beasts unfamiliar to me and we were on an animal skin or whatever by a crackling fire and then she was some other girl maybe Laura Many Spears who I thought about a lot at that time or maybe Haley Jones or maybe even June if I could manage to not think of the June that called me queer all the time and if I could do that then I would think about how her breasts would feel under my hands how good they would feel how soft her skin would feel and then I was taking her shirt off. Things went backward and then leaped way forward a lot in my head like I would be touching her bare breasts and then she would have all her clothes on and I was taking her shirt off again but maybe it was a different color this time it was a wash of things it was night and we were in the hunting lodge and then suddenly we might be in Big Man's truck, a red F-150, parked outside La Fleur the town was below us lights spread out all beautiful and whatnot and we were making out it was the June who was nice to me and I was kissing her neck because I was pretty certain that's what you did with a woman you liked but if I could not hold it together in my head then she became the June who laughed at me and everything would shut down if you know what I mean then I'm back in the mountainous woods with the super-hot babe the one from the book and I'm taking off her cloak-thing and she's got nothing on under that because for some reason women in that kind of world didn't wear underwear or whatever and the snow is falling around us we are outside but not cold and then we're doing the deed on a huge red dragon skin and then if I could make it happen she would be June again and we'd be in the truck but still in the woods with the dark snowy peaks around us and for a second we are really doing it good like in the pornos I saw at my cousin Jay's and then it is all sensation a sudden tension a white light and then I'm standing next to my bed with my jeans at my ankles trying to find the fucking box of tissues.

The east end of Twelfth Avenue in Paradise Falls is where all the dealerships are, with their long rows of shining hoods and unflawed windshields and black, black tires, all lined up under those giant American flags that hang heavy even in a decent breeze. We hit every single lot, used and new—my grandpa was meticulous, something he learned in the military, I think—looping in and out of them as we went down Twelfth until we hit the end, beyond which there was nothing but the sudden Plains that went out and out until they met the blue of the sky in a hard, definite line. Big Man would not stop until I saw something I really wanted that had a price I could afford, and that led to us going through some of the lots twice because I was indecisive in my moment of greatness. June sat between us and when she grew sufficiently irritated she asked why weren't we stopping.

This is stupid, she said.

My girl, Big Man said. We'll stop when Little Man sees what he wants.

June said nothing. My grandpa was one of the few people I had ever seen her show any modicum of respect for or deference to—and one time even fear. Her mother was one of the others, at least when June was a kid, and that was only because she used to show June the back and sometimes the front of her hand with regularity. I had seen her do it. It is not a thing you forget, a mother striking her daughter, who is a near-replica of herself. June's mom was a known drunk and had treated June's brother the same way until he finished high school and enlisted in the Corps and went over to Iraq and came back even quieter than he had been before, a man who had killed enough people as a sniper that he found it fit to spend the rest of his life, which ended not that many years after the time of this story, living in Paradise Falls, going through a series of women who eventually left him and working construction and drinking around town and then one day he went down to the big pawnshop off Twelfth and got a rifle like the one he had used in the Middle East and rigged it up in such a way that he was able to turn his head and most of his neck into a wall decoration. The old lady next door thought a bomb had gone off. A few days later there was an obituary in the Paradise *Tribune* that was a typical sort of tribute to the dead, but what caught me was the photo they used. It was his military photo and he looked so much like June, he was the other side of the indian-head nickel from his little sister, a beautiful face with a chilling distance. Here was a man you might befriend and treat with respect or hate and do your best to destroy, but regardless you would never know what was back there in the cold behind his gaze, you would only sense it in the echoes that reached the surface.

SORROW

The magpie reasserts its stance
with a testy flap of black on white,
a flash of blue, and a stone might do

but doesn't so I have to shoo it off
with a folded tartan picnic blanket
and the baby rabbit—

what is left of it—keeps screaming—
and it happens that your options narrow
sometimes drastically,

and what you might do if the kids
were not here is walk to the car,
and get in it and leave, turning up

the radio, but they want to know,
now, what one does with enormous
pain when you see it, where

At Jerry's Used Beauties a black Bronco caught my eye and I decided to see what it was all about. Big Man pulled into a spot at the empty end of the small lot, parking so the wind hit the front of the truck head on. It was one of those days when the wind blasted you and everything else within a hundred miles so hard that you felt there was something personal about it. Before I opened the door and stepped down into what I was certain would be my endless future I asked Big Man if he wanted to come with us.

You know what you want, he said, waving the hand that did not hold a cigarette. Besides, he said, I can't stand them sons of bitches that work at these places. Buncha thieves, every last one of them.

On our way to the Bronco we passed a cherry-red Mustang convertible that seemed to catch all the light there was and I could not help but stop and look at it and put my hands on it and run my fingertips over the fenders, and I did all this in an unthinking manner, which led to June saying if I was going to touch it like that I better just hurry up and get nasty. Quit wasting my fuckin time, she said. We both laughed. A salesman showed up the way they do, all over-big smiles and ringed fingers and bright watches and hard handshakes like they had something to prove. He had curly brown hair and a mustache and a round freckled face like a child's doll and he could not have been more than a few years older than me but the way he conducted himself suggested a supreme authority over all things, and I felt about him the way I had felt about such white guys for some time, that I hated him and wanted to hurt him. He had seen me looking at the Mustang with its somewhat dirtied white drop top and said we should go look at some of the cars at the far side of the lot. He used his hands the way I had seen field generals do in old documentary footage.

Oh, I don't know, I said. I like this one. It's kinda sinuous and marauding, you know?

I smiled at him. I had never spoken to anyone like that in my life. June was looking at me. The salesman paused. I could see that there was something small and weak hiding behind his mustache and his brown slacks and his slightly wrinkled tan shirt with its sleeves rolled up his hairy arms, and I somehow knew that he had never been in a fight in his life or had not won a fight or had not had his face hit so hard that he lost all shame about running, and when I saw this he stopped being real to me and I felt relaxed and careless about him and had no need to prove myself any longer.

That's true, he said, that one is a real beauty. But I think there are some models over here that are probably more within your range.

How do you know how much money he's got? June said. Fuck, maybe he could buy two of these.

The salesman looked at her and did not say anything.

O.K., then, I said. Maybe we go look at those other ones.

Anyway, it was fine that I could not afford the Mustang. Within ten hours I would have totalled that car at a hundred and twenty and been thrown thirty feet through or over the windshield, feeling the amazing revelation of true human flight just before I landed and lost most of my face.

The Bronco was a slick boxy thing with tinted windows and had been pretty well taken care of by whoever had owned it but it was a piece of trash, too. That truth came too late, of course. The salesman said to take it for a drive so I did, across Twelfth and down past the high school, where everybody was getting out and walking the sidewalks with their backpacks and whiteboy haircuts and whitegirl makeup, which were not all that different from the haircuts and makeup I saw back in La Fleur but were also very different; there was a neatness, something contained or shiny or soft about them that stood out to me in places like Paradise and still does. There were a few indian kids among them and

you should put it, how might you
stop it, and they're watching,
and the rabbit is done, past saving,

so I lift the stone again and the bird
hops off as I walk across, and looks on
with interest, and if at first I miss it

the second time smashes in the socket
of the rabbit's eye, the one the magpie's
already emptied out to a plush red nest

in a divot of flesh. I'm in the driver's seat
and breathing and need to drink some water.
I can overhear its screaming in the silence

that fills the car on the drive back to a house
that is a little different, harder, sharper,
and where my children will not look at me.

—*Nick Laird*

as we drove past I could tell that June was really watching.

I wonder if those guys even know they're indin, she said.

I laughed.

No, really though, she said. Do they even know, or are they like one of those dogs that grew up with cats. Do they just think they're cats?

I don't know, I said. I guess I don't care.

Way to think, she said. Big smart guy over here.

We drove around some more and ended up on the north hill where some of the big houses were and though the last snowfall had been only a few weeks before there were already those older white guys out, the ones who hold some vision of America together, tending their lawns, probably thinking with strange anxiety about that first ride on the mower. Back at the dealership I said I was good to go and what's next. June was laughing at me by that time. However it was I was being, I guess I had never been that way. I must have looked rich or at least like a real fancy guy or something.

June had got her money exactly thirty days before me. She had withdrawn all the cash and closed the account her mom set up for her and then asked me if I could get Big Man's pickup for the day to drive her to Paradise but I could not because it needed the brakes done, so we rode with her cousin's girlfriend's brother—his name was Seth Jackson, he drove this maroon Impala that had had its back window busted out by his ex's brother, Tom Jack Big Bear III—and I sat in the back and froze my ass off the whole way and by the time Seth dropped us off near the used-car lots I was shivering all to hell.

June bought the first thing that caught her eye, an orange Camaro with flames on the driver's side and fat tires in the back and windows with blue-silver tint on them that was peeling at the edges and a black leather gearshift worn smooth and gray and frayed at the stitched seams. Before we pulled out of the lot she did this thing that made a great impression on me. She opened her backpack and said, Check it out.

She reached into the bag and took out a purple T-shirt and unfolded it and then took this beautiful and surprising thing from the shirt and using the leather string run through its stem she hung it from the rearview mirror and then there it was, hanging in front of both of us. At that point in my life I had seen many things hung from a rearview—crucifixes and rosary beads and fuzzy dice from the county fair and air fresheners and sometimes a combination of several or all of the above—but the sight of an eagle feather hanging from a rearview was really something. These days a feather hung from a mirror is a common thing but at that time it struck me as having a meaning larger than I could say. And even now I am not sure what to say other than it is good. An eagle feather in a car is a good thing. But what I said at the time was: Holy fuck you got caddy! When did you get so caddy?

She set a hand on the worn black steering wheel and smiled at me and then nodded toward the feather.

I got it at one of those old eagle-catching pits way out to the Sweet Grass Hills.

Naw, I said. Really?

Fuck no, she said. Still sacred as fuck though.

We both laughed.

Here is what having your own ride means where I am from. Your house could be falling apart, you could be wondering what you are going to eat next week, you might owe seventy-three of your relatives a twenty spot here and a five spot there, but the first hint of money and there you are, you've got a light in your eyes, you find yourself at a dealership, you are walking into the Great American Dream. In the old days, after the horse had come to us and changed everything forever and we had mastered a not insignificant part of the continent and left the peoples around us with a lot of bad memories, it meant everything to have a good warhorse and if you had one you might paint it in such a way that anyone who knew of you could see from quite a ways out that it was your horse, it was you riding into camp, and I believe we do the same with our cars and trucks, that in a subterranean and profound manner the meaning horses once had for us we now find in these vehicles. I have long suspected this is why we spend so much time driving around—we rode our horses in the same way, going where we felt like going when we wanted to go. The difference is that now we cruise Main. We joke with one another at the pump while we fill up our tanks. And sometimes we park in the empty lot where an auto-parts store or a restaurant or a tire shop once stood, watching the headlights stream by, waiting for the night to take us somewhere, anywhere.

Inside the dealership we sat in chairs before a broad L-shaped desk in a large-windowed room, waiting. June had her long legs crossed and her long hair was pushed back behind one ear and it fell over her shoulder like a broad stroke of black paint and she appeared the way she very often did at that time—bored, insolent, impatient. I had such an easy time looking at her that there were moments I had to remind myself to look away. She knew I liked her but she was used to that. Someone was always looking at June. She could brush them off as easily as the morning shakes off the night.

God damn, she said, do they not take indin money here or what?

She laughed. Her fingers were long and graceful and her nails were purple, the paint chipped. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her thighs. Some other part of her had begun to pace the office. It was like this to be around her, you felt her lose interest and then though her body was next to you she was gone. The salesman looked up from his paperwork.

No, no, he said. That's the great thing about money. It's all the same, doesn't matter who's spending. A dollar is a dollar is a dollar. He had a wide smile on his face. I wanted to bounce a quarter off his teeth.

Outside it was very bright and you had to squint to see anything at all. The wind had dropped off some, though it was still going hard enough that June had to keep pulling her hair away from her face. Fuck, she said. Is this for real? We both laughed. When we got to the truck Big Man had his window cracked and he was resting an elbow on the doorframe, holding his most recent cigarette below the opening while he read the sports section. He was always reading about high-school sports, checking to see how the La Fleur teams were doing. I knocked on the window with a force that surprised me. In the past hour it seemed I had become a changed man. The lightning of all the great champions ran through me. He rolled the window down.

Bet you feel like you could do anything right about now, he said.

Heck yeah, I said. I smiled a big smile without even meaning or wanting to.

Don't come home too late, he said. There's still ice on the road in some of those river bottoms.

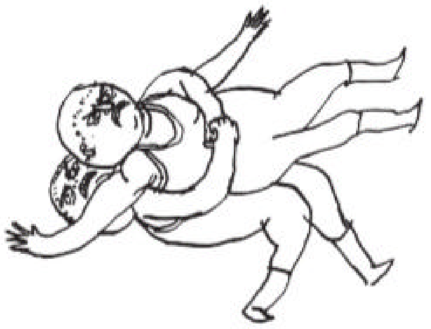
I'll do my best, I said.

That Eagle Strikes girl is a hell of a runner. There's a big picture of her in here.

Jolene, I said. She's a sophomore.

Sure, he said. I'll have to get down to State to watch her.

He rolled up the window and put the truck in gear and with that the man who had brought me up drove off. The man who had been generous with me and taught me to be respectful and a few times had raised his voice when I was not—moments that I still remember with a terrible clarity. Now that he has been gone for many years I can see that my grandpa was a handsome man who carried himself with dignity and conducted himself in relation to others, whether indian or white or otherwise, with a supreme sort of confidence that often found its residence in the country of indifference. He did not care what you thought about his life or what he did with it and usually he did not care what you did with your own unless you were fucking up so badly that he would lose patience and tell you how stupid you were being. He was profoundly Blackfeet in ways I cannot say he understood or that I understand now, though I can see he was a way only Blackfeet have been without quite knowing we are that way, and when I finally lost him I knew that some part of myself I had taken for granted had broken from the rest of me and been tossed into the great emptiness around us and that somehow this, the truest loss of my life, had left me both more and less than I was before.



With some help from the wind the Bronco's driver's-side door banged shut with that hollow, metallic thud you hear only in what are now called older cars. I adjusted the seat and checked and tilted the rearview and rolled down the window and adjusted the side mirror, and then I sat there and did not know what to do.

How caddy do you feel? June said.

Goddam caddy, I guess.

That's how I felt when I got that Camaro, she said. I felt plum fast and brand-new.

We laughed.

I took us out of the parking lot onto Twelfth and then down to the mall. I got a huge salted pretzel with extra cheese and June got an orange smoothie and we walked down the long, broad halls for a while and kind of meandered in and out of stores and bought a few things and stopped at the mostly empty arcade and played all the co-op games that cost more than a dollar per round for as many rounds as we felt like, and on our way out I stopped at the A.T.M. and then got another pretzel. We walked back to the Bronco under a vast and quickly darkening sky, the western horizon on fire with the last of the day's light. I was looking up the whole way.

The sky is really beautiful, I said.

Yeah, she said. She had her arms crossed.

I took a huge bite of pretzel.

Are we lucky? I said, chewing.

How do you mean? she said.

Like don't you look at this sky and feel lucky? I said.

Not really, she said. I'm freezing.

Driving down Twelfth the air coming in the window was very cold and June told me to roll it up but I left it down so she turned the heat on full blast. I wanted to hang an arm out there so I could feel like all the people I had seen in my life driving with their windows down, their arms hanging out and looking cool in the cars they owned. I leaned my head out the window and howled.

You're such a weirdo, June said.

Don't hate me because I'm beautiful, I said.

Ewww, she said.

BIANCO
DiNAPOLI
TOMATOES
PARMIGIANO REGGIANO
MADSHORWATH

"And, to make no difference, add a three-year-old bay leaf."

We laughed. When we reached the edge of town I stopped at a drive-thru that looked like it had changed very little since it opened. It had the old-style sign with the neon outline and the long awning you parked under, and there was a bouncy white girl going from car to truck to car taking and delivering orders. When she got to us her voice was so bright and high and chipper that I felt myself leaning away from her. I ordered a triple cheeseburger and a large fries and a large Coke and June ordered a double cheeseburger with no onions and a large fries and a Dr Pepper and then asked if it was on me, and when I said it was she added a strawberry shake. Other girls were always talking and fretting about their weight and trying to diet and meanwhile June ate whatever she wanted and remained thin and mean about the whole thing. Whenever another girl or an older woman—to June that meant anyone past high school—put on a few pounds she would go after them: Fuck she turned into a cow. Or, Did you see that one? Holay she just got fat. Or, a personal favorite, Ho, she just looks like she got into a fight with the pantry and won!

We ate in silence and when we were done I pulled out of the parking lot and took us onto the main road and then we were on the ramp and hitting the freeway. A few miles down the road there was a hitchhiker walking slowly, and without looking back he put his hand out. I could tell he was an indian just by the way he walked. Most of the hitchhikers you see in this state are indians. He had his shoulders up by his ears and he looked very cold so I started to slow down and June said what the fuck was I doing.

He's probably drunk, she said. Hitchhikers are always drunk or perverted.

I told her that might be true and gave it some gas and watched his silhouette disappear in the rearview and along with him the brightly burning lights of Paradise faded and I did not understand why but a sadness ran through me. June tore off a loud burp and I said God damn she was rough and she laughed. The Plains were rolling and wide and still dappled with big patches of snow that shot by off the sides of the freeway and there was just enough light left that what snow there was appeared luminescent and strange. For a while there was nothing but the sound of the Bronco taking us home, and then June pulled a tape from her purse and put it in. It was a country album by a musician I have never liked, mostly because I have never liked country, but on that particular night it worked for a bit. The songs were the old kind, a guy and his guitar discussing the miseries of the world, which people often mock, but the world is a hard place to be. The farther we went the stronger the wind got and eventually there were gusts that hit the side of the Bronco so hard they took us to the shoulder so I tightened my grip on a steering wheel that for the first time since I started driving was mine. I had decided to take the longer way and go through Lucero because my uncle Lyle lived there and I had an idea about the rest of the night. After a while we went down into a deep cut in the land and at the bottom was a river lined by leafless cottonwoods standing like tall gray ghosts on its banks and as I usually did in such places I thought about what Big Man had told me when I was a boy, that in the old days this was where we would have made our camps in summer and winter because wood and water were close at hand. The only evidence of human presence now, though, was a golf course, closed for the season, the long fairways and greens covered with snow. A few minutes after we made it back up the other side of the cut we passed the prison, and I told June look her dad was waving and she laughed. Then we were in Lucero, driving past the biggest American flag I have ever seen, hanging silent and massive from a very tall pole. As we made our way to Lyle's I was reminded of how shabby the town was. The houses were a little rough and so were the white people there, more so than in Paradise, and as a result I felt much more at home.

Lyle had been in Lucero since I was a kid, after he married this white girl who had grown up on a farm outside of town. They met in Seattle but her parents were still out on the acreage and she wanted to be nearby, so she moved back and there went Lyle. His dad was Big Man's brother—everyone called him Ice Man but almost no one could tell you why—and Lyle looked a lot like him, big ears and big nose and kind of sleepy eyes, always going around with this smile on his face like he knew something you didn't. Which he probably did! Everyone knows something you don't. But only the rare person takes advantage of that and turns it into a life style. He came to the door wearing that half slouch I remembered well and he was easy in himself, his shaggy hair coming down a little over his ears, and even though we had not seen each other in a long time he went right into it.

Heck, you got ugly, he said.

He gave me one of those soft handshakes I was not accustomed to getting when I was not on the reservation.

Thank you, I said. I had to work *reeeeeal* hard to get this way.

He looked from me to June and back and somehow his smile got even more sly and he asked what we were up to and when I told him he laughed. All right, he said. Let's do it. We went down to the store and I gave him some cash and he got a couple of eighteeners and a bottle of what turned out to be very bad whiskey and we went back to his place and by then his wife, Cindy, was home from her shift at the E.R. We drank and laughed in the living room and she made chicken and peas and potatoes for everyone and while she cooked she had a few beers herself and snuck a shot or two of the whiskey before Lyle went to the kitchen and got the bottle and by the time dinner was ready I was a few sheets to the wind and looking to add a few more and Lyle looked as sleepy as I had ever seen him and Cindy was staring dumbly around the room like she would be calling in sick the next day and June looked as fine and perfect as new snow. Some time later, when we had come to the end of whatever part of the night we'd been in and there was a long silence, Cindy looked at each of us with the kind of seriousness that only hits when you are halfway to the grave or halfway to hell with drink. Let's go for a drive! is what came out of her mouth and then we were cruising around Lucero, Lyle taking us up and down the main streets and the side streets real slow, staying so perfectly within the lines at such consistent speed that anyone who saw us would know our condition. We were in his old, beat-to-hell Pacer, a strange, rounded-off vision of a future that never happened. They'd asked me to drive but I told them I was too ripped out of it. Then Cindy had said to take her rig, a Chevy S-10, but Lyle asked how the hell we were going to fit in that and she said, Oh yeah. So there we were, cruising around in a yellow car with a green stripe that ran up the hood and a weird door, the dash lights all burned out and windows poorly tinted and not even a rearview or a driver's-side mirror for Lyle to see if a cop was behind us. I sat in the back seat with June, the two of us crunched in together, thigh to thigh, which had been part of my foolproof plan. June was leaning away from me, and I had one arm along the back of the seat and was leaning toward her, just enough that I could see out the windshield. We went down Main, the string of yellow lights that ran along the edges of the marquee of the old theatre still lit up. We hit the end of downtown and turned and crossed the tracks and it was clear that whoever could afford to live where they wanted did not live on this side of town. There were fewer street lights or maybe there was more distance between the lights because the blocks were longer, I don't know, and there were more cars parked on the streets than where Lyle and Cindy lived, which was across town and up the hill. Everything good is always up on the hill. Down below things get crowded. This is where I'd live if I lived here, June said. Typical indin, Lyle said. I had never been drunk after buying a car so I told June she looked beautiful and she smiled and I was so surprised by this that I could not say anything more. For years after that I thought about why she had smiled and eventually concluded what many people do about such matters, which is that most things are not worth dwelling on. Lyle kept driving around town and we kept drinking and at some point Cindy turned to us and said, Are you two together? And with that whatever spell I had been under and hoping June would fall under was gone.

Fawk no, June said. Not even a chance.

God damn, I said, immediately wishing I hadn't spoken.

Huh, Cindy said. She reached down by her feet and came back with the bottle and handed it to me. Have some of this bad whiskey, she said.

She faced forward again and I took a long swig and winced it down. We stopped at a bar and Lyle put his hand back and said to give him some cash. He and Cindy went in and they were there for what seemed like a long time. June flipped the release on the seat in front of her and pushed it forward so she would have more legroom. They had left the windows open so there was a breeze that came through the car and I popped open another can and took a long drink and a few minutes later I felt totally fucked up. You look really fucked up, June said. I laughed. Fuck hey, I said. Look at me. I got a wicked Bronco. We both laughed. Then Lyle and Cindy were back and they had drinks in plastic cups in their hands and a sixer of Olympia. This guy is really fucked up, June said. Cindy looked at me hard in that drunk way and laughed, and Lyle drove us home. Puking on my knees in the bushes by the neighbor's driveway and June laughing about it and my uncle helping me to the couch and me saying, Someone better kiss me, I'm a really rich indin! In the morning I woke up and it seemed like more than a few horses had walked over my head and then walked back over it. June was sleeping nearby on a mattress that had come from the back room I think. Her breath was coming quiet and easy and I realized I had never seen her sleeping and whatever ragged edge it was that followed her around when she was awake was gone. Soon Lyle was in the kitchen cooking and then it was bacon and eggs and fried potatoes all day in that house, and Cindy came out from the bedroom and was leaning on Lyle like the night before had not happened and me and June had not passed out listening to them fight. I put my forearm over my eyes to protect my brain from having to deal with the day and a little later someone tapped my elbow. Cindy had not taken her makeup off and up close she looked like a melting clown.

Can we borrow a few dollars? she said. Just till payday. We can get you back after that.

Sure, I said. Check my coat. I don't know where it is. Front pocket. With legendary effort I turned onto my side and June was awake now and staring at me with her dark eyes and if there was someone who could read the look on her face I was not that one. ♦

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BOOKS

ABOLISH THE POOR

Matthew Desmond argues that poverty persists because we let it.

BY MARGARET TALBOT

"Books about poverty tend to be books about the poor," the sociologist Matthew Desmond writes in "Poverty, by America" (Crown). That's true whether the motivation is to blame the poor for their lot—chronicling the supposed pathologies creating a "culture of poverty"—or, more commonly nowadays, to generate empathy via detailed ethnographies of survival and agency amid deprivation. It was true of the first books that set out to systematically map and measure poverty, such as the Victorian reformer Charles Booth's seventeen-volume "Life and Labour of the People in London," and of Progressive Era attempts to rattle the consciences of the well-off, like Jacob Riis's document of New York tenement life, "How the Other Half Lives."

When Michael Harrington wrote his 1962 classic, "The Other America," a work of morally charged narrative nonfiction often credited with helping to inspire the War on Poverty, his aim was to reveal the "socially invisible" poor to the rest of America. A cocoon of postwar

"We typically don't talk about poverty as a condition that benefits some of us," Desmond writes in his morally charged manifesto.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHILIP MONTGOMERY

prosperity and complacency, he wrote, blinkered "middle-class women coming in from Suburbia on a rare trip," who might "catch the merest glimpse of the other America on the way to an evening at the theater"; it also blinkered "the business or professional man," who might "drive along the fringes of slums in a car or bus" without regarding it as "an important experience." The book's dominant rhetorical modes, as Harrington's biographer Maurice Isserman notes, were paradox and revelation. If the scales were pulled from the eyes of his well-meaning readers, they would see, in the shadows of American plenty, tens of millions of poor people, whom Harrington catalogued and described: rural poor, city-dwelling slum poor, alcoholic skid-row poor, and so on—all of them urgently needing the help of the government and liberal élites. Even a book like Charles Murray's "Losing Ground," an influential neocon attack on "welfare dependency," from 1984, focussed on the poor themselves, if only so that Murray might make an argument about how they had immiserated themselves by adapting to anti-poverty policies.

Desmond's terrific previous book, "Evicted" (2016), is emphatically about the lives of the poor. It followed eight struggling families trying to stay housed in Milwaukee, where, in the poorest neighborhoods, "median rent for a two-bedroom apartment was only $50 less than the citywide median." Families were spending up to seventy per cent of their monthly incomes on housing that might have stopped-up plumbing, broken windows, filthy carpets, and front doors that wouldn't lock. And when they fell behind on rent for any of the multitude of reasons that people living precariously do—a trip to the emergency room, an unexpected car repair, a steep utility bill paid to keep the lights or the heat on—they faced the chaos and humiliation of eviction.

"Evicted" illuminated big and sometimes novel themes: the outsized role of housing costs in the creation and perpetuation of poverty across the nation, the fact that evictions had become so common that businesses found ways to profit from them (moving companies, for instance, would extract the last of a tenant's belongings, down to the shower curtain in the bathroom, and place them in storage, which would cost more than many tenants had to reclaim them). But the book's power resided in its stories, which Desmond told with a keen eye for detail and scene-setting drama. His reporting was intimate and particular. "Jori and his cousin were cutting up, tossing snowballs at passing cars," reads the first line of the book's prologue, evocatively named "Cold City." One of those snowballs proved fateful: the driver of the car it hit got mad, and kicked in the door of Jori's mom's apartment; the landlord evicted the family.

"Evicted," which won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction, was almost universally acclaimed, praised especially for the vividness of its portraiture. So it's brave, in a way, that Desmond has chosen such a different approach for his bracing new book. Books about the poor are vital, he says; they do the important work of "bearing witness." But "Poverty, by America," he explains, is a book about how and why the rest of us abide poverty and are complicit in it. Why do many of us seem to accept that the problem is one of scarcity—that there is simply not enough to go around in our very rich country? Where there is exploitation, there are exploiters, and this time Desmond sees many more of them, including most of his prospective readers. Corporations batten on low-wage labor, but so do consumers, who have come to expect the cheap goods and services—the illusorily frictionless food deliveries, the Amazon orders that arrive like conjuring tricks the afternoon you place them—that poorly paid, nonunionized, often temporary workers provide.

"Landlords are not the only ones who benefit from housing exploitation; many homeowners do, too, their property values propped up by the collective effort to make housing scarce and expensive," Desmond writes, noting that most homeowners receive federal aid in the form of mortgage-interest deductions and other subsidies. (The payout to homeowners in 2020—a hundred and ninety-three billion dollars—far exceeded the fifty-three billion dollars in direct housing assistance that the government gave to low-income families.) "We need not be debt collectors or private prison wardens to play a role in producing poverty in America," Desmond goes on. "We need only to vote yes on policies that lead to private opulence and public squalor and, with that opulence, build a life behind a wall that we tend and maintain."

More manifesto than narrative, "Poverty, by America" is urgent and accessible. It's also austere. There aren't many stories about individuals; Desmond seems to dole these out with purposeful spareness, perhaps so that we won't get distracted by them. But the one he tells about himself is affecting. Before he went to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, or won a MacArthur, or became a professor at Princeton, Desmond grew up outside a little town near Flagstaff, Arizona, living with his family in a modest wood-panelled house that he loved. Then his father, a pastor, lost his job, and the bank took the family's home. "Mostly I blamed Dad," he writes. "But a part of me also wondered why this was our country's answer when a family fell on hard times." He kept wondering while he was in college, using scholarships and loans, at Arizona State University, supporting himself as a barista, a telemarketer, and a wildland firefighter. The question compelled him to write "Evicted." Behind that question, always, were the bigger questions that animate this new book: How is it that the United States, a country with a gross domestic product "larger than the combined economies of Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, India, France, and Italy," has a higher relative poverty rate than those other advanced democracies? Why do one in eight Americans, and one in six children, live in poverty—a rate about the same as it was in 1970? Why do we put up with it?

The short answer, Desmond argues, is that as a society we have made a priority of other things: maximal wealth accumulation for the few and cheap stuff for the many. At the same time, we've either ignored or enabled the gouging of the poor—by big banks that charge them stiff overdraft fees, by predatory payday lenders and check-cashing outlets of what Desmond calls the "fringe banking industry," by landlords who squeeze their tenants because the side hustle of rent collecting has turned into their main hustle, by companies that underpay their workers or deny them benefits by confining them to gig status or that keep them perpetually off balance with "just-in-time scheduling" of shifts. To the extent that middle- and upper-class people unthinkingly buy products from such companies and invest in their stock, or park their money in those banks, or oppose public housing in their neighborhoods despite a professed commitment to it, or bid up the prices of fixer-uppers in Austin or San Francisco or Washington, D.C., they, too, are helping to buttress the system.

You might assume that government action would do more to help, maybe even to lower the poverty rate. Programs like food stamps, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are lifelines for many. Recent research suggests that even public housing, much maligned, is strikingly beneficial for the families that can get a spot, which can involve a years-long wait. The intimidating towers are now far outnumbered by more dispersed and approachable low-rises. Children who grow up in public housing show lower lead levels in their bloodstreams, more robust mental health, and better results in school than those whose families are scraping by in the private housing market, according to a trio of recent studies; a fourth study, published last year in the *American Economic Journal*, found that kids who'd lived in public housing had higher incomes and lower rates of incarceration as young adults. Moreover, it turns out that the United States is not all that tightfisted when it comes to social spending. "If you count all public benefits offered by the federal government, America's welfare state (as a share of its gross domestic product) is the second biggest in the world, after France's," Desmond tells us. Why doesn't this largesse accomplish more?

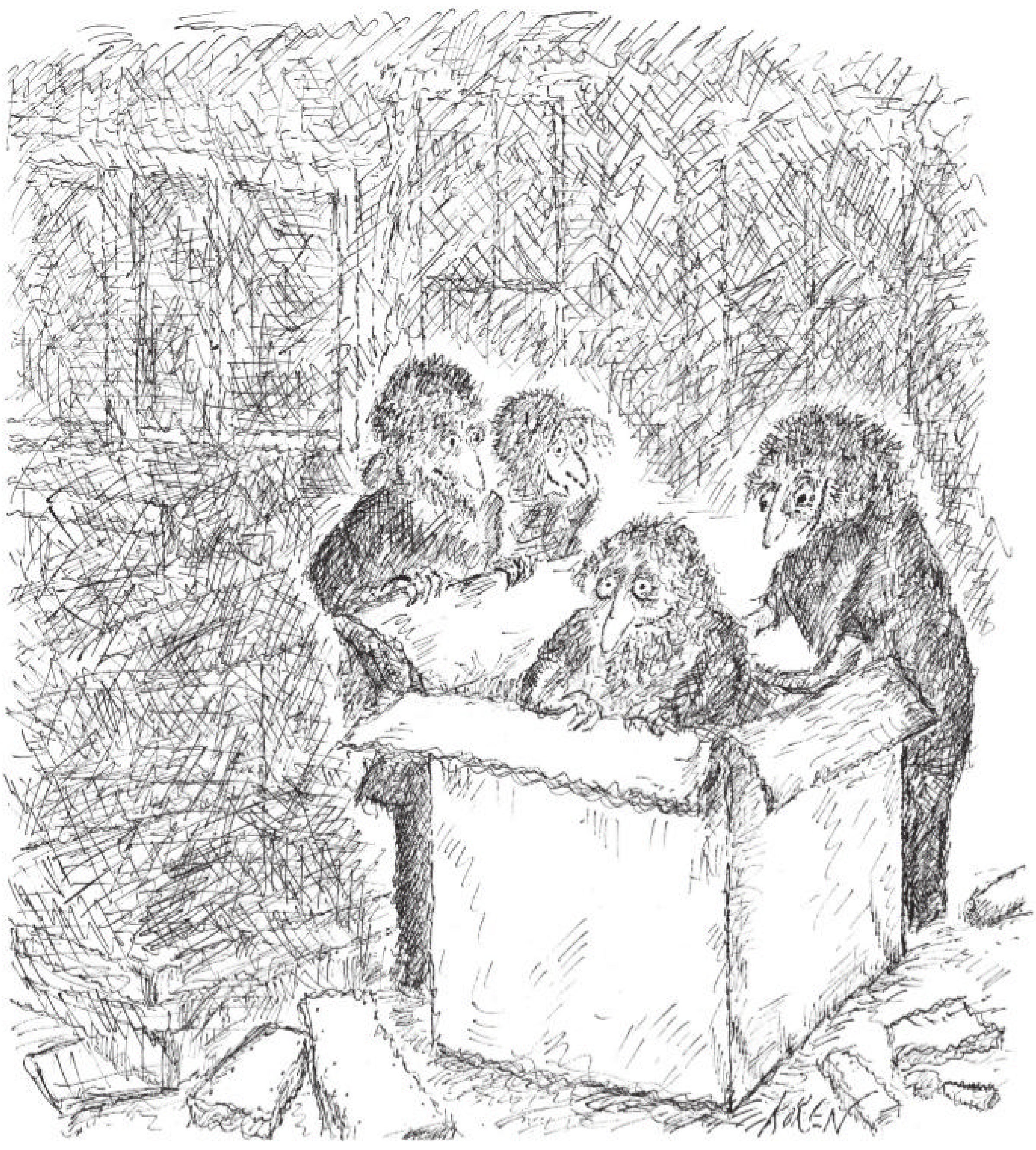
For one thing, it unduly assists the affluent. That statistic about the U.S. spending almost as much as France on social welfare, he explains, is accurate only "if you include things like government-subsidized retirement benefits provided by employers, student loans and 529 college savings plans, child tax credits, and homeowner subsidies: benefits disproportionately flowing to Americans well above the poverty line." To enjoy most of these, you need to have a well-paying job, a home that you own, and probably an accountant (and, if you're really in clover, a money manager).

"The American government gives the most help to those who need it least," Desmond argues. "This is the true nature of our welfare state, and it has far-reaching implications, not only for our bank accounts and poverty levels, but also for our psychology and civic spirit." Americans who benefit from social spending in the form of, say, a mortgage-interest tax deduction don't see themselves as recipients of governmental generosity. The boon it offers them may be as hard for them to recognize and acknowledge as the persistence of poverty once was to Harrington's suburban housewives and professional men. These Americans may be anti-government and vote that way. They may picture other people, poor people, as weak and dependent and themselves as hardworking and upstanding. Desmond allows that one reason for this is that tax breaks don't feel the same as direct payments. Although they may amount to the same thing for household incomes and for the federal budget—"You can benefit a family by lowering its tax burden or by increasing its benefits, same difference"—they are associated with an obligation and a procedure that Americans, in particular, find onerous. Tax-cutting Republican lawmakers want the process to be both difficult and Swiss-cheesed with loopholes. ("Taxes should hurt," Ronald Reagan once said.) But that's not the only reason. What Desmond calls the "rudest explanation" is that if, for whatever reason, we get a tax break, most of us like it. That's the case for people affluent and lucky enough to take advantage of the legitimate breaks designed for their benefit, and for the wily super-rich who game the system with expensive lawyering and ingenious use of tax shelters.

And there are other ways, Desmond points out, that government help gets thwarted or misdirected. When President Clinton instituted welfare reform,

KARL STEVENS

"We're all getting tired of these Marvel exhibits, but, on the other hand, they do pay for the smaller, artsier shows."



"Ben came to me fifty per cent assembled."

in 1996, pledging to "transform a broken system that traps too many people in a cycle of dependence," an older model, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or A.F.D.C., was replaced by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF. Where most funds administered by A.F.D.C. went straight to families in the form of cash aid, TANF gave grants to states with the added directive to promote two-parent families and discourage out-of-wedlock childbirth, and let the states fund programs to achieve those goals as they saw fit. As a result, "states have come up with rather creative ways to spend TANF dollars," Desmond writes. "Nationwide, for every dollar budgeted for TANF in 2020, poor families directly received just 22 cents. Only Kentucky and the District of Columbia spent over half of their TANF funds on basic cash assistance." Between 1999 and 2016, Oklahoma directed more than seventy million dollars toward initiatives to promote marriage, offering couples counselling and workshops that were mostly open to people of all income levels. Arizona used some of the funds to pay for abstinence education; Pennsylvania gave some of its TANF money to anti-abortion programs. Mississippi treated its TANF funds as an unexpected Christmas present, hiring a Christian-rock singer to perform at concerts, for instance, and a former professional wrestler—the author of an autobiography titled "Every Man Has His Price"—to deliver inspirational speeches. (Much of this was revealed by assiduous investigative reporters, and by a 2020 audit of Mississippi's Department of Human Services.) Moreover, because states don't have to spend all their TANF funds each year, many carry over big sums. In 2020, Tennessee, which has one of the highest child-poverty rates in the nation, left seven hundred and ninety million dollars in TANF funds unspent.

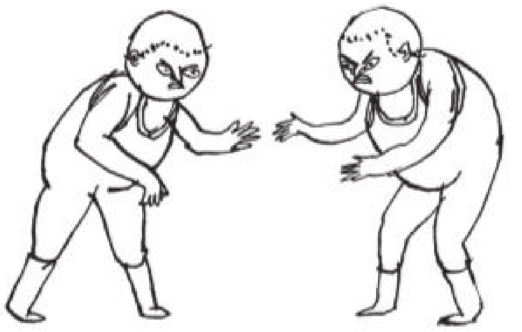
"Poverty, by America" is a slim book, at fewer than three hundred pages of text, but it's packed with revelations like these—and with statistics and studies, though, fortunately, a reader need never find herself stranded in a thicket of them. (Seventy-odd pages of endnotes help take care of that problem.) Desmond writes particularly well about the ways in which the poor—though they're said to be hidden from the rest of us—have never escaped the notice of the markets. For years, big banks treated overdraft fees as a reliable stream of income, extracted from the chronically overdrawn. In 2020, the average fee for overdrawing your account was $33.58, and, because banks can charge these fees multiple times a day, a tiny overdraft can rack up fees of more than a hundred dollars in a matter of hours. Payday-loan stores and check-cashing outlets step in where banks fear to tread, and make good money off the venture. (Unlike traditional banks, they are more common in low-poverty Black neighborhoods than in high-poverty white ones. Black and Hispanic families are five times as likely to have no bank account as white families are.) The reason these lenders charge extortionate fees is, Desmond says, not that the poor are such risky prospects—most payday borrowers ultimately pay back the loans—but that, in a market where the poor have little choice, it's easy to make money off them. Desmond quotes an observation of James Baldwin's to this point: "Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor."

And Desmond offers solutions as well, scattered throughout the book and exhibiting varying levels of ambition. The relatively simple ones include helping people claim the aid owed to them. Less than a quarter of families eligible for TANF cash receive it; less than half of elderly Americans who could apply for food stamps do. The phenomenon is so widespread across social programs that Desmond maintains it's more appropriate to speak of welfare *avoidance* than of welfare *dependency*. Yet there are small fixes that have been shown to make a difference, including better-designed applications and targeted assistance with filling out forms. The harder goals include raising the federal minimum wage from $7.25 an hour, a rate at which it has been lodged since 2009, and having the Secretary of Labor oversee its regular resetting—a method closer to what many other countries do—rather than waiting for Congress to act. Other measures: supporting unions, still the best way to empower workers; calling on states to better regulate payday lending; making sure that people have access to contraception and abortion (a little tricky these days), since these are proven ways of keeping women and children out of poverty; making it easier for the poor to become homeowners—monthly mortgage payments are generally far less than rent—by getting the government to provide additional backing for small mortgages when banks won't offer them (a program that encourages rural homeownership in this way already exists); creating more public housing so that people don't have to languish on waiting lists; eliminating exclusionary zoning policies that ban apartments or other multifamily dwellings in higher-income neighborhoods; making sure that developers are then given incentives—through tax relief, for example—to set aside percentages of the housing for low-income families.

That last part is important: you don't want a scenario in which rich developers get richer off industrial-chic condos designed for moneyed singles, while city officials congratulate themselves on their commitment to urban density. And it's tough to pull off. Desmond cites New Jersey as having become a leader in this regard, ever since its Supreme Court issued a series of rulings, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, that produced what's known as the Mount Laurel doctrine, requiring municipalities to offer a "fair share" of affordable housing—the fair share varying by a town's income distribution. He says that the policy has forced hundreds of towns in New Jersey to "break ground on affordable housing developments." (Unfortunately, as he doesn't say, the Mount Laurel doctrine has also been somewhat undercut by elected officials, cleverly exploited by developers, including the Kushner family, and slowed by litigation. Still, it's a start.)

Finally, Desmond wants us to think of ourselves as "poverty abolitionists." He wants us to bear in mind a company's labor policies when we make decisions about where to invest and what to buy; to conquer NIMBY-ish instincts and welcome true economic diversity in our neighborhoods and schools; to think about and act on our own roles in perpetuating income inequality. "The goal is singular—to end the exploitation of the poor—but the means are many," he writes. It's an appealingly ad-hoc and flexible approach.

In part because this book is aimed at the hearts and minds of the widest possible swath of readers, it doesn't have much to say about politics. To be a poverty abolitionist means avoiding businesses that don't treat their workers fairly, as some people shun businesses that contribute to global warming or promote tobacco products or engage in animal cruelty. But, in the absence of politically organized public boycotts, such actions won't be legible to companies. If, on my own, I stop mailing packages by FedEx and switch to UPS—FedEx employees generally aren't unionized, Desmond points out, while UPS employees generally are—will anybody notice? Perhaps because Congress and many state governments are in the hands of a Republican Party that sees the mildest adjustments of pure market forces as redistributive pit stops on the road to socialist hell, it's discouraging to talk about electoral or legislative politics. Activists and elected officials who want to take up his proposals will have to devise their own strategy.



In this book, anyway, Desmond mostly sets aside the kind of systemic explanations—deindustrialization, globalization, neoliberal ideology, even capitalism itself—that have held sway in progressive circles for a long time now. "We typically don't talk about poverty as a condition that benefits some of us," he writes. "It seems we prefer more absolving theories of the problem. There is, of course, the old habit of blaming the poor for their own miseries, as if Americans were made of lesser stuff than people in countries with far less poverty. But structural explanations are more in fashion these days, explanations that trace widespread poverty back to broken institutions and seismic economic transformations." At times, Desmond's dismissal of such analysis seems too quick. He complains about the passivity of a word like "deindustrialization," the way it can make the phenomenon sound like an unintentional calamity. Fair enough, but it's still a useful term (and one that he relied on in "Evicted," to discuss the loss of manufacturing jobs in Milwaukee).

In fact, one of the more encouraging findings Desmond cites is a 2020 Pew survey showing that a large majority of Americans have come to blame structural obstacles, not personal failings, for poverty, and to believe that most of the rich got that way not through hard work but through advantages. That's a big shift in a country that has long been enamored of bootstrap mythology. It seems like a precondition for taking poverty abolition seriously and believing it to be possible. And presumably some of that shift can be attributed to structural analysis of inequality and the way it has trickled down into familiar talk about the one per cent. Moreover, even if, as he notes, "systemic" racism and poverty are "made up of untold numbers of individual decisions motivated by real or imagined self-interest," some kinds of self-interest—that of international corporations, for example—are a lot more powerful than other kinds.

Still, Desmond is right to warn us that a dependence on such buzzwords can have the effect of excusing us, soothing away the apprehension that those of us who abhor such forces are getting something out of their machinations nonetheless. And it's refreshing to read a work of social criticism that eschews the easy and often smug allure of abstraction, in favor of plainspoken practicality. "Poverty, by America" deserves to be one of those books you see people reading on the subway, or handing around at organizing meetings, or citing in congressional hearings. Its moral force is a gut punch. ♦

BOOKS

GOOD TALK

Can conversation save our souls?

BY HUA HSU

There was once a time when strangers talked to one another, sometimes eagerly. "In past eras, daily life made it necessary for individuals to engage with others different from themselves," Paula Marantz Cohen explains. In those moments of unpredictability and serendipity, we confronted difference. There were no smartphones, message boards, or online factions. Maybe because life moved at a slower pace, and every interaction wasn't so freighted with political meaning, we had the opportunity to recognize our full humanity. Nowadays, she argues, we are sectarian and "self-soothing," having fallen out of such practice. What we need is to return to the basics: to brush up on the art of conversation.

Cohen, a professor of English at Drexel University, is the author of "Talking Cure: An Essay on the Civilizing Power of Conversation" (Princeton). She makes the case that talking to others—sharing our stories—is how we learn things and sharpen our belief systems, how we piece together what it means to be funny or empathetic. Conversation can change our minds while sustaining our souls. There's some social-science research on her side. A 2018 study showed that participants who had more substantial conversations reported relatively high levels of satisfaction with life.

It's in long, wandering discussions, perhaps, that we learn how to be human.

Cohen considers models of good, entertaining conversation throughout literary history and popular culture, from Jane Austen to Abbott and Costello. Her inspirations draw heavily from her areas of academic expertise, as she explores how conversation is woven into the fabric of French intellectual culture (the salon) or élite English life (the gentleman's club). But her primary qualification here is that she is a self-professed "talker," the sort of person who lives for chatty checkout lines, leisurely coffee dates, vigorous college seminars, and spirited dinner parties—as well as spirited daydreams about whom you would invite to your fantasy dinner party of historical figures. She writes of the special "synthesis" that occurs in marriage or other long-term partnerships, in which one's lexicon merges with that of another, producing shorthand terminology and a distinct rhythm and style. But she doesn't prize these types of decades-long exchanges over others; she always remains open to new connection. "Surely, my readers can identify with that welling of positive feeling—that almost-falling-in-love-with someone with whom we engage on an authentic level," she writes. "I have felt this not only for friends and even strangers with whom I've had a probing or even a fleeting conversation but also for whole classes of students where it can seem that the group has merged into one deeply lovable and loving body."

A defense of conversation, of course, is necessary only if one feels it is under attack. In Cohen's view, the practice of experiencing "uncertainty and openendedness in a safe environment" has become imperilled by a variety of forces: political polarization, a mediascape that profits from dissent, the conformity of groupthink, even campus drinking culture. "Our society abounds in bad conversation," Cohen writes, in part because it makes for more entertaining content on the Internet and television. People would rather regurgitate "predetermined positions," she fears, than wrestle with ambiguity. No spaces seem safe for the frictions or disagreements that make conversation go. Families today appear to be increasingly unstable, requiring an ever-expanding cheat sheet of inoffensive talking points for navigating Thanksgiving. College was once a zone of free-

ILLUSTRATION BY HENRI CAMPEÃ

flowing experimentation; today, it is dominated by ideological orthodoxy. Conversation was once an end in itself; now it is the stuff of self-help gurus and business-school strategy.

Amid all these forces, Cohen returns to true conversation as a kind of sanctuary. And, whether or not you agree with her description of the current climate, there's something deeply appealing about her commitment to conversation. In its ideal form, it involves no audience or judge, just partners; no fixed agenda or goals, just process. As the philosopher Michael Oakeshott observed, in conversation "there is no 'truth' to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought." What matters, he continued, is the "flow of speculation." Conversation is casual; it isn't a chat (too noncommittal), a debate (too contentious), or a colloquy (too academic). And yet the cachet of conversation, with its connotations of open-mindedness and open-endedness, also encourages an overly broad application.

What can it possibly mean, for example, to have a "national conversation"? Bill Clinton is often credited with being the first sitting President to inaugurate the tradition, when, in 1997, he called for a "conversation on race." In the two-thousands, with the rise of the Internet and then social media, these calls intensified, particularly in the immediate aftermath of tragedy. Uses of the phrase "national conversation" soared during the Presidency of Barack Obama, America's last great conversationalist-in-chief. He often seemed less concerned with presiding from a position of power than with running the country as though it were a seminar, seeking consensus through debate and discussion. There was the Beer Summit, the listening tours, the town halls. (It's a footnote of history that his main rival in the 2008 primary, Hillary Clinton, launched her campaign with a similar call for addressing division head on: "Let the conversation begin.")

It's easy to grow cynical when politicians invite us to participate in conversation. They get to acknowledge difference, or feel another's pain, rather than commit to meaningful action. And it's dispiriting to sense that our everyday conversations—ephemeral, intimate—take place inside larger, seemingly endless national ones, and to so little effect. As President, Obama invited national conversations on race, policing, gun violence, the future of cities and neighborhoods, and, in June, 2009, "fatherhood and personal responsibility." But years later even he appeared to lose hope. "What has happened is that our national conversation has broken apart," he said in 2022.

Obama seemed interested in trying to solve a problem inherent to conversation: its tendency to devolve into argument. A few years ago, the literary theorist Stanley Fish wrote that "the state of agreement that would render argument unnecessary—a universal agreement brought about by facts so clear that no rational being could deny them—is not something we mortals will ever achieve." This wasn't meant to be a despairing conclusion. Instead, Fish pointed to how different genres of argument tilt along different axes of dispute: political ones often revolve around the interpretation of facts, while a marital argument is about "the management of words" within an intimate setting. Yet, Fish noted, political and marital arguments are similar in that, for the most part, neither is winnable. In marriage especially, there is no such thing as definitive victory, only momentary accords and truces. For Fish, there was no all-purpose method for conversation, just different conventions for different situations.

If conflict is inevitable, then we might as well prepare for it. In "Good Arguments: How Debate Teaches Us to Listen and Be Heard" (Penguin Press), Bo Seo, a two-time world-champion debater, offers his own method for disagreeing with others. "An argument contains nearly infinite space for improvement," he writes. But if you know what you want people to conclude, you can begin mapping out a way for them to feel that such a conclusion is irresistible.

Competitive debate is a flawed model for civic discourse—it's a world full of rules, time limits, and decorum. Contestants draw their assignments at random, and they are sometimes required to argue for positions or policies with which they disagree. In one pressure-filled round, Seo and a partner had to argue that "the world's poor would be justified in pursuing complete Marxist revolution." There's a coolness to his description as he discusses how to approach such a prompt with serene reason. He explains how definitions might be structured for maximum efficacy, and, more generally, how to listen to what is being said by your adversary and how to expose its fallacies. In the case of class-based revolution, Seo and his partner knew they had to adapt a "full-blown Marxist screed" for a larger audience, arguing for "grand, civilizational" stakes.

In "Good Arguments," Seo offers a set of rules gleaned from his years as a debater and as a debate-team coach. For example, avoid an abstract word when a concrete one will do. To describe our educational institutions as "failing" might lead us to any number of solutions, maybe even existential questions about the nature of institutions writ large. But to call them "underfunded" draws a line between problem and solution. For Seo, precise language produces clearer sentences, and a better-defined "journey" for listeners to follow, furtively delivering them to the destination that you've already chosen for them. His rules are seductive, a balance of sound logic and rhetorical flourish. ("Find the applause line.") Good arguments are products of elegant and intelligent design; although they invite others in, their conclusions are meant to feel inescapable.

Seo's paradigm is at some distance from actual political speech. One of his rules is "no emoting." But he began to see the power of persona one day when he attended a campus sit-in, at which different speakers shared their experiences as part of the movement to force institutions to divest from fossil-fuel companies. Accustomed to forms of exchange where proportional, well-reasoned ideas trumped charisma and panache, Seo found the speeches revelatory. "Ideas don't move people on their own," his roommate explained to him. "People move people." Seo concluded, "We had to make something new: a mode of speaking that did not force people's hands but grasped them."

A chilling moment came in 2016, when Seo and some Harvard debate pals were watching one of the Presidential debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. What they saw was not diplomatic restraint but pure emoting. Trump was a product of what the linguist Deborah Tannen calls "argument culture," in which a "pervasive warlike atmosphere" hangs over all public dialogue. Watching Trump, Seo was reminded of what could happen in the nastiest of debate rounds, when opponents competed in bad faith. "Bullies used the adversarial format to bludgeon opponents and used rhetoric not to enhance but to elide reason," he writes. "They took advantage of the debate's openness to ideas by introducing lies. Bad debates seemed to point back to some weakness in the activity itself. They showed that a debate, so hijacked, could be a harmful force in the world."

We might share Cohen's vision of a good conversation as endorphin-releasing, something akin to the warmth and contentment of slowly experiencing love. But we live in the age of the amygdala, aiming for outrage. Even if political discourse took the form of Seo's idealized debate, the dynamic might still disserve us. In a debate, we aren't trying to find common ground with someone else; Seo's rules are not for winning over strangers but for defeating opponents in tournaments. Reason and personality are deployed not to appeal to the person you're debating but to impress observers who listen and judge, while never entering the fray. It's telling that social-media platforms, like Twitter, characterize themselves as serving a public conversation, and yet the presence of an audience turns online conversations into performances. A politician today is more likely to dunk on some random hecklers on Twitter than to court them.

Does genuine conversation have prospects within the political realm? In "The Persuaders: At the Front Lines of the Fight for Hearts, Minds, and Democracy" (Knopf), the journalist Anand Giridharadas laments a contemporary climate that is "confrontational and sensational and dismissive." In the age of sophisticated psychographic profiling, strategists think that it's rational for warring sides in a campaign to "write off" those who are unlikely to join their cause and instead focus on mobilizing their base. "Leaders who attempt outreach have been attacked by their own as sellouts, chided for centering those who would never ally with them anyway over those who have long had their back, if not their attention," he writes.

Giridharadas depicts a world so fractious that many people have given up on the possibility of debate, let alone rangy conversation. His book tells the stories of progressive organizers, politicians, and activists. Like their counterparts on the right, they struggle to reach the other side. Some of those he interviews point to the election of Trump as a moment that destabilized their sense of what could be debated or discussed. At the same time, online discourse was becoming more sophisticated, even academic; suddenly, terms such as "white supremacy," "patriarchy," and "prison abolition" had entered the mainstream.

Among progressives, a shared interest in opposing Trump didn't mean that they could agree on how to express themselves collectively, balancing precision with "message effectiveness." Giridharadas writes, "With white supremacy and patriarchy and the discontents of capitalism now front and center in the conversation, how could those groups be expected to put aside their feelings on these matters for the sake of keeping the coalitional peace?"

It's not just that the public nowadays seems unpersuadable. The echo chambers keep shrinking as well. "We can keep talking to each other and becoming a narrower and narrower slice of this country," Alicia Garza, a founder of the international Black Lives Matter movement, tells Giridharadas, "or we can actually fight for power." Giridharadas sees a winnowing of conversation in both public and private spaces as a "war on persuasion" itself.

PAUL
KAROLIK

"I don't care if it's the local or the express. We're getting on board."

For Giridharadas, hope comes in the form of Steve Deline, a gay activist in California. Deline was dismayed when, in November, 2008, California voters approved Proposition 8, a ballot measure to bar same-sex marriage, and he decided to join an experimental program implemented by the Los Angeles L.G.B.T. Center. Volunteers would knock on the doors of people who'd supported Prop 8 and have a conversation with them about why they had done so. "It came from a place of desperation and feeling like I had no other choice but to try to talk to the people who I didn't think I could talk to," Deline explains.

The more conversations Deline found himself in, the more comfortable he felt listening to the stories of those who, on the face of it, did not wish him well—and the more comfortable he felt sharing his own vulnerabilities with them. These private conversations, taking place patiently and deliberately, unhitched from the rhythms of national ones, offered each side the chance to recognize the other's humanity. Deline eventually helped start the New Conversation Initiative, which aimed to train people in "non-judgmental" voter outreach. “What we learned is changing your mind on something is about navigating a sea of conflicting emotions,” Deline tells Giridharadas.

And yet the “deep canvassing” model is far from the autotelic ideal of conversation that Cohen prizes; Giridharadas’s book, after all, is titled “The Persuaders.” Conversion may be an outcome of conversation, of course, but the ideal posits that the exchange isn’t merely the instrumental pursuit of an agenda. Although Giridharadas’s voluble progressives may be nudging others to be more open-minded, they themselves aren’t open to the views of the voters they’ve set their sights upon. For Cohen, talk is about the experience; for Giridharadas, it’s ultimately about the next election.

We can’t be confident, either, that our splintered public sphere is a symptom of conversational collapse. There has never been a time in human history when the average person has had access to the sheer volume of conversations that technology makes possible today—all those takes, tweets, threads, text chains, posts, and articles. Then there’s the world of podcasting, where people readily listen to hours of freewheeling, sometimes thorny discussion. Is it that we’re incapable of having conversations, or that there are simply more voices to account for? Could it be that we are suffering from too much talk, not too little?

I recently subscribed to a newsletter about small talk—for research, of course. It was filled with tips and tricks for steering and prolonging conversations; one involved wearing sunglasses in a public place in order to practice making hyper-focussed eye contact with strangers. The very notion of being a good conversationalist now falls into the world of self-improvement and self-help, where the ability to speak to someone is a means to an end rather than a means toward making the world a more ambiguous place. The logic of accumulation gets applied to social interaction: talk only when you can get something concrete out of it.

The same applies to the new A.I.-powered chatbots. Even as journalists have gleefully set about prompting them into displaying unsettling personalities, there have been stories of programmers creating conversational partners modelled on the deceased, which may comfort those dealing with grief. But these are asymmetrical exchanges; they succeed when they’re good for us. We don’t inquire whether they were good for our digital interlocutor.

Where do we find a great model for conversation? Cohen points to the college seminar, a rare case of “a conversation that is at once a means to an end (learning something) and an end in itself (engaging in the flow of group talk).” She views teaching as drawing on the skills of a good conversationalist, going back and forth with her students, hopeful that they stumble into a kind of “communion.” The professor is an authority and a guide, but everyone must be ready to make side trips into promising tangents. Every class is fleeting; most aren’t archived or analyzed afterward. “When the term is over,” Cohen writes, “everyone in the class understands that something rare and mysterious has occurred and that our perspective on the world has been subtly but indelibly altered.”

What makes the classroom such an unusual model for contemporary discourse is its temporary and ultimately low-stakes nature. Even if a breathtaking seminar discussion spills into dinner and coffee afterward—and then late-night dorm-room philosophizing, a desire to stay inside that “loving” moment as long as possible—the next session might be a dud. It comes and then quickly goes because, other than some scattered notes, there are no remnants. The power comes from the realization that these conversations can happen only once: they are improvised and ephemeral, and can never happen again in the same way. You may forget what was discussed, but you will remember the exhilarating experience of the discussion itself.

Reading a book about conversation inevitably makes you want to talk to people, even if, like me, you are not exactly a talker. Mostly, I wondered whether my conversations achieved the heights outlined in “Talking Cure.” Did I seek out others to be heard, or to hear as well? There were moments, while ruminating on Cohen’s arguments, when I felt compelled to text friends and ask them the last time they experienced this idealized flow state of conversation. This led me to scroll through my phone and sift through my chat histories and think about whether these chains of messages, some going back a decade, constituted proper conversations or not. Was there something false about my feelings of affection for people I have only ever e-mailed with? What’s the difference between typing one’s most unpopular thoughts in a chat window and uttering them aloud?

Somehow, the erratic, digressive nature of these chains is what makes them human. We talk with one another not just to discover ideas but to share umbrage and merriment, to compare experiences, express sympathy, or sniff out bullshit. We offer one another models of unreason. Cohen closes “Talking Cure” with an example of a conversation enthusiast: Pierre Bezukhov, the wandering, occasionally absent-minded protagonist of Leo Tolstoy’s “War and Peace.” She describes her experience teaching the book to a seminar of “unusually engaged” students and their delight in reëncountering Bezukhov throughout the epic novel, a kind of Everyman trying his best to make sense of the world shifting around him.

The character bears witness to great suffering; he finds himself unable to adequately “convey his thought to others just as he himself understood it.” At one point, Bezukhov realizes “the impossibility of changing a man’s convictions by words, and his recognition of the possibility of everyone thinking, feeling, and seeing things each from his own point of view.” Yet Bezukhov persists. He continues to share his thoughts and to listen, remaining, as Cohen writes, “alert and receptive without feeling that a definitive answer must be found.” It’s the imperfections we offer one another in dialogue that make such endeavors worthwhile. We keep talking, knowing that it brings us closer to one another as it simultaneously casts us apart, and that the conversation is never over. ♦

BOOKS

USE YOUR HANDS

How Maylis de Kerangal turns work into writing.

BY LAUREN OYLER

At the beginning of Maylis de Kerangal's novel "Painting Time," which was published in French in 2018 and in English in 2021, the central character, Paula Karst, is having drinks with two former classmates from the Institut de Peinture, in Brussels. All working trompe-l'oeil painters, the trio are both jazzed and trepidatious about the reunion; the intensity of their training, almost ten years before, bonded them as friends and cemented them as competitors. (And, O.K., possibly as lovers.) Possessed by a "desirable madness" for their craft, they should be spending the evening working, or resting in order to work more. But something draws them together. Paula, who has just painted a film set in Moscow, is entreated to "describe your exploits" first:

> Instead of panoramic impressions and sweeping narration, instead of a chronological account, she begins by describing the details of Anna Karenina's sitting room, which she had to finish painting by candlelight after a power failure plunged the sets into darkness the night before the very first day of filming; she begins slowly, as though her words escort the image in a simultaneous translation, as though language is what allows us to see, and makes the rooms appear, the cornices and doors, the woodwork, the shape of the wainscoting and outline of the baseboards, the delicacy of the stucco, and from there, the very particular treatment of the shadows that had to stretch out across the walls; she lists with precision the range of colors—celadon, pale blue, gold, China White—and bit by bit she gathers speed, forehead high and cheeks flaming, launching into the story of that long night of painting, that mad crunch.

Were I to begin this review with panoramic impressions, I might mention the weird refrain that looped in my head—it's so good it makes me want to puke—while reading de Kerangal's novels. Were I to begin with a chronological account, I might narrate how I discovered "Painting Time" in a bookstore, never having heard of its author, and went on to recommend it widely and increasingly indignantly to many people, none of whom had heard of de Kerangal, either. However, Paula Karst is right; if I began that way I would be getting ahead of myself. Although much of the novel shows Paula painting, we first see her operating as a kind of writer: using language to set the scene and then to slowly and deliberately up the stakes. Indeed, we learn the source of the story's tension before her friends do; the actual writer here knows that her reader might need a bit of dramatic nudging to care about wainscoting and celadon, though the words themselves are mesmerizing. Paula has an ideal audience—fellow-painters, who will know exactly what having to work by candlelight means—but that doesn't mean she can skimp on the details. She must first describe the woodwork, the stucco, and especially the "very particular treatment of the shadows" before she reveals that all this work, the product of years of training, was under threat.

The phrase "as though language is what allows us to see," precise in the way it describes the power of words to make something *almost* real, suggests de Kerangal's own philosophy of style. Abstraction, myth, and narrative must be built upon a foundation of specificity; description is what allows language to transcend description. De Kerangal's novels tend to describe workplace dramas, and she's particularly interested in process, how people accomplish a task during a set period of time. Here it's decorative painting; elsewhere it's restaurant work ("The Cook," from 2016), a heart transplant ("Mend the Living," from 2014), or the construction of an ambitious suspension bridge

De Kerangal smuggles a fresh, vocational language into the realm of literature.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVIHER LOREDO

("Birth of a Bridge," from 2010). The project at the center of each book may be career-defining—in "Painting Time," Paula will eventually accept the gig of a lifetime, a reproduction of the cave paintings at Lascaux—but de Kerangal also studies romance, family conflicts, hobbies, and history. Her books aren't just technical portraits but careful, steady re-creations of emotional worlds. If, in her work as a painter, Paula takes the descriptions in a novel, "Anna Karenina," and makes them real, then de Kerangal converts that process into something that is both real and abstract: another novel, which derives its power from the precision that accrues within it.

Born in Toulon, in the South of France, in 1967, de Kerangal published her first novel in 2000. Translated literature can have a jumpy path in the U.S.; in February, Archipelago released "Eastbound," a 2012 work, translated by Jessica Moore, which follows a twenty-year-old conscript on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Delay aside, it's an exciting occasion, not only because the translation of any of de Kerangal's books is a gift but because translation is so essential to her work, in both form and content.

For de Kerangal, translation often serves, as it does in "Painting Time," as a metaphor for the use of language in general. One of the most striking aspects of de Kerangal's writing is the vocabulary—while she drops a dictionary-cracker now and then, she also frequently employs the sort of words that are easy to translate, because whatever they describe is so specific that there is only one way to say it. Her research involves documentary-style immersion, during which she harvests terms and phrases from the professions she depicts. (In "Mend the Living," a patient's ailment transforms her into a "shaky, claudicant creature," and a young surgeon delights in the "auscultation" of his lover's body.) Too often, she says, this kind of language is deemed "not glamorous enough" for the novel; by using it, she aims to make literature "porous to the world." Drawing on lexicons from architecture ("the swirling volutes of her cigarette") to zoology ("the digitigrade gait of the sardana dancer when he's nearing a quintal"), she imbues simple observations with a profound sense of interconnectedness. You could say that a man walks on the balls of his feet, but that wouldn't capture the links between this man (a heart surgeon), birds, and a style of Catalan dance; it might say something about the person, but not about the world through which he walks. De Kerangal also embraces colloquial speech, and the slang in her long, racing sentences heightens the feeling that we're moving between one language and another.

Although the metaphor of translation appears in all of de Kerangal's novels, it's "Mend the Living" that features it most movingly. (There are two translations; Moore's is the one to use.) The novel begins at 5:50 A.M., when twenty-year-old Simon Limbeau wakes up to go surfing with his friends. The water is described ominously, but it's the exhausted van ride afterward that sets the story in motion: the boys crash into a pole, and Simon, riding without a seat belt, flies through the windshield. He arrives at the hospital in a coma, brain hemorrhaging; his condition, the attending physician must firmly convey to his parents, is "irreversible." We learn that in 1959, at the Twenty-third International Congress of Neurology, a neurologist and an infectious-disease specialist presented their findings with the "cold clarity of those who, conscious of the fundamental import of what they have to say, abstain from any embellishment and simply describe, describe, describe": from then on, the heart stopping could no longer be considered "the sign of death." Life was technically defined by the function of the brain.

Practically, this is what made organ transplantation possible. The physician is so firm when speaking to Simon's parents because, in order to harvest and transport the boy's heart, he needs to begin an urgent process, which requires handoffs to an array of doctors, coördinators, and potential recipients waiting across the country. Nevertheless, old symbols die hard. When the hospital's transplant coördinator mentions the heart, Simon's mother, Marianne, imagines a haunting montage of associations in response to the realization that her son is dead: "the bird-of-night terrors panicking inside a child's chest; the staccato drum accompanying Anakin Skywalker's destiny; the shot beneath the skin when the first wave rises up—touch my pecs he'd said to her one night, muscles tensed, monkey grimace."

The procedure that the hospital hopes to initiate is not the only call-and-response under threat here. De Kerangal shows how the function of the heart, the way it responds to stimuli received by the brain, transforms those stimuli into meaning. The devastating irony is that, even as Simon's heart keeps beating, his mother's is breaking. One surgeon, the one with the digitigrade gait, "sees the heart as the linchpin of depictions (paintings and poems) that organize the relation of the human being to the body, to other beings, to Creation, and to the gods; the young surgeon is amazed at the way it's imprinted in speech . . . always situated right at the intersection of the literal and the figurative, the muscle and the affect; he takes great delight in metaphors and figures of speech in which it is the analogy of life itself." This is why the recipient of Simon's heart, Claire Méjan, works as a translator: her body becomes a vessel for what we might call another person's work, and that work involves converting the organ's symbolic power into literal life.

"Mend the Living" is a circadian novel; the successful transplant ends exactly twenty-four hours after Simon's alarm goes off. In narrative, as in life, time is a useful frame, because it moves forward at the same pace it always has; our experience of it is what changes. In "Mend the Living," each section focusses on a different character, a different node in the process of the transplant, whose relationship to time is contingent, from the I.C.U. director closely following protocol to the sleep-deprived nurse desperately hoping for a man to text her. Although Claire has been waiting for a suitable heart for months, relocating to a small, dark apartment so that she can be near the hospital, she feels "it's not that time has changed speed, slowed down by paralysis . . . no, it just crumbles away in a dismal continuity. The alternation of day and night soon has no caesura." Simon's parents, meanwhile, want to prolong time. When Marianne calls her ex-husband to tell him what happened, she becomes "paralyzed by the horror that suddenly rose in her at the sound of this voice, so dear . . . but suddenly estranged, abominably estranged, because it arose from a space-time where Simon's accident never happened." She sobs and cannot speak, knowing that, once she corrects the "anachronism" of that voice, she can never again "experience this disappeared time" when Simon was alive.

"Eastbound" is the only one of de Kerangal's works in translation that does not take a profession as its subject, but it clarifies her interest in young adults, full of promise, with the unique relationship to time this entails. Most of these characters have a vocation, an obsession that helps them structure their ideas of what comes next: for Simon Limbeau, it's surfing; for Paula Karst, it's trompe l'oeil; for Mauro, of "The Cook," it's food. But "Eastbound" begins, "These guys come from Moscow and don't know where they're going." Aliocha is one of these more than a hundred "guys"—not boys, not men—who line "the walls in the passageways and corridors, sitting, standing, stretched out on the berths, letting their arms dangle, their feet dangle, letting their bored resignation dangle in the void." They're on their way to Army training, but they don't know where, exactly, that is. Once you get to Siberia, the logic goes, "what difference does it make?"

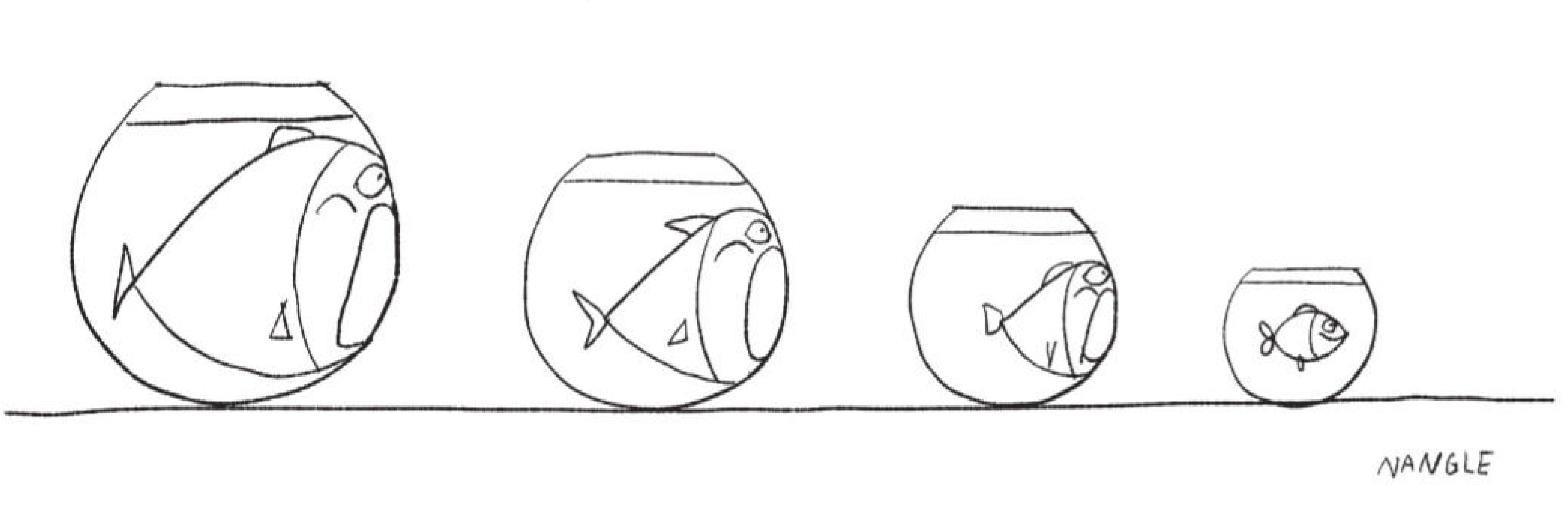
Like most men in Moscow between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven, Aliocha didn't want to serve. Up until draft day, he quixotically hoped for some exemption, whether through a fake medical certificate, "direct attempts at bribery," or, if all else failed, a Hail Mary conception. (After six months, a pregnancy allows a woman's partner to avoid enlistment.) Sadly, Aliocha is a virgin, and on the train his high-flown associations with this "territory of banishment," this "giant oubliette of the Tsarist empire," crash to earth with one pragmatic thought: "Siberia—fuck!" Surrounded by his aggressive, carousing compatriots, he suddenly has an idea, with enough conviction that it will become the focus of the rest of the book: Run away.

If Aliocha's inability to evade conscription is the result of a complex system, then his attempt to defect is represented as a kind of production, requiring the trust, knowledge, and courage of several people. His initial plan is to disembark at a station so big that he can blend into a crowd without the sergeant's noticing—the sergeant who, not unlike the nocturnal nurse in "Mend the Living," is distracted by a love interest. In the course of the book, Aliocha acquires two accomplices: a *provodnitsa*, or hostess, who clocks him making his first failed attempt to escape, and Hélène, a Frenchwoman in first class who boarded the train spontaneously, to leave her Russian lover, Anton.

In place of vocation, Aliocha has violence: his intimate knowledge of terror grants him expertise, in turn, and he uses force to intimidate a fellow-conscript who harasses him, a young boy who risks exposing him, and Hélène herself. In de Kerangal's other novels, her subjects could all be described as people who work with their hands, and here Aliocha uses the same tools: "the child's eyes grow wider than dinner plates as Aliocha's hand covers his mouth—the conscript had leapt to his feet the second the kid came in, locking the door with one hand while muzzling the boy with the other." The symbol recurs in gentler images throughout the book. When two attendants come to Hélène's cabin searching for Aliocha, they don't speak French, so their hands do the communicating, and "flutter in the air like moths." The work of translation is revealed to be both poignant and practical—Hélène doesn't share a language with Aliocha, either, and from the moment she introduces herself, with a palm on her sternum, they spend many hours working together through gestures.

As in "Mend the Living," a life is on the line. Before Aliocha's decision to defect, it was a metaphorical one; he was being conscripted not just into physical suffering but also into meaninglessness. After he initiates his plan, things get concrete. Time transforms into something physical; kilometres and minutes become interchangeable as the train moves slowly through the tundra. In Siberia, the night "never closes completely" but "stays ambiguous, charged with an electric luminosity that always makes you think day is about to break." The journey takes place in the course of several days, but feels like one all-nighter: Aliocha, like Paula, of "Painting Time," is working against the clock. He loses track of the date, and in moments of intensity becomes fixated on what de Kerangal has referred to as the "minuscule slice of a second," conveyed through the simple present tense.

The climax arrives when the sergeant conducts a surprise roll call. Aliocha is absent, and scrambles to hide in a bathroom, where the *provodnitsa* shields him from the search; the conscripts get back on the train, and Aliocha waits next to the toilet for "a quarter of an hour, fifteen kilometers." Again,



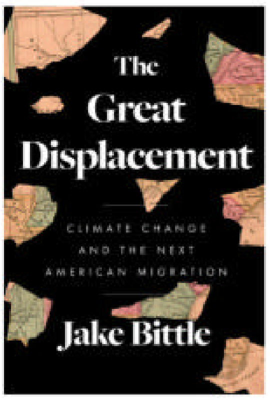
he uses his hands, telling himself to "tear each kilometer from time, one by one."

Of course, "time" is not just the endless passing seconds—when we're safe, or free, we can experience it as an idea. The big attraction on the Trans-Siberian Railway is Lake Baikal, the deepest and oldest lake in the world. "Lots of people board the Trans-Siberian just for that," de Kerangal informs us, having taken the trip herself in 2010. At one point, Aliocha hopes to disembark at Irkutsk, the stop closest to the lake; when he fails, he hides in Hélène's cabin while she leaves to see the view out the window. In the corridor, there's an absolute frenzy:

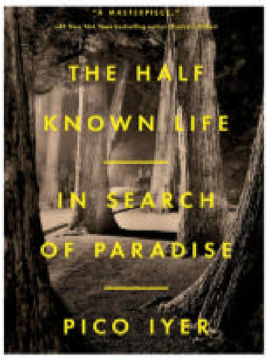
> People shout, sing, share cakes, break down in tears, bottles of vodka are opened and passed down the line, a woman faints from emotion, another recites a poem, a couple dances, everyone is talking at once, and in the general euphoria Hélène forgets about Aliocha confined behind her and melts into the unintelligible commotion, imagining the superlative praises, the lyrical witticisms, the contest of hyperboles—an old man at the end of the car beats his chest and shouts, we Russians may be poor, but we have Baikal! The largest supply of freshwater on Earth! Someone asks loudly, how cold is it, ten, twelve degrees? I don't care, I'd give anything to dive in, replies a woman who is asked to kindly consider the fragile ecosystem. Fascinated, an eight-year-old boy wants to know if the lake contains prehistoric monsters, and someone knowledgeable answers, invertebrates and micro-organisms from the beginning of time . . . soon, swaying in unison with the other passengers, Hélène, too, is taking a photo with her phone, an image she sends to Anton straightaway, the train is passing Lake Baikal and I am at the window on the corridor side, I'm thinking of you.

In interviews, de Kerangal has reflected on the importance of being a "contemporary writer"—someone who holds "all the layers of time together." This does not mean, I think, that she mixes them, but that they remain striated, defined, like an ancient lake seen through the window of a passing train via a smartphone screen, or like a young woman, trained in a Renaissance art form, producing a facsimile of cave paintings in order to preserve the originals. It takes immense skill, patience, and clarity to paint time, to render the melee of past and present, symbolic and real. Language may not be what allows us to see it, but in the right hands we can get close. ♦

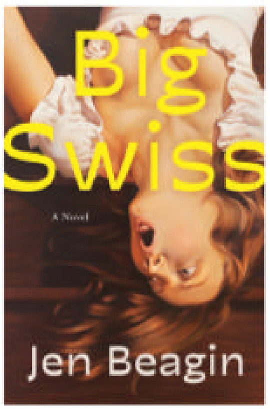
BRIEFLY NOTED



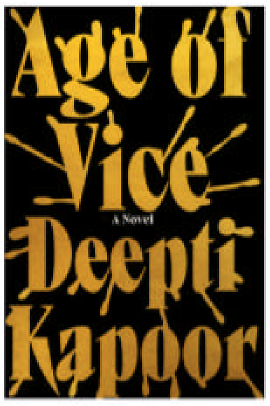
The Great Displacement, *by Jake Bittle (Simon & Schuster).* Roving across the United States, this survey explores the precarious environments in which many Americans now live, places irreversibly altered by floods, fires, hurricanes, and drought. "Managed retreat" is a popular term in climate discourse, but whole communities, from Arizona ranchers to Indigenous tribes in Louisiana, face disaster without any sort of plan. Victims of megafires in California find themselves at the mercy of the state's housing crunch. Bittle argues that the approaches of both government and the insurance industry are totally inadequate for today's dilemmas: Where should we build? What should we protect? And what do we owe those who lose everything?



The Half Known Life, *by Pico Iyer (Riverhead).* This travelogue examines spiritual customs from around the world, meditating on the idea of paradise. Iyer visits the mosques of Iran, the insular streets of North Korea, the mountains of Japan, Aboriginal Australia, and Belfast (the "spiritual home of civil war"). Many would-be Edens have, variously, been riven by conflict, divided by religion, and wracked by colonization. Grappling with "a world that seems always to simmer in a state of answerlessness," Iyer gradually reconciles himself to the contradictions of earthly paradise. "The most beautiful of flowers has its roots in what we regard as muck and filth," he reflects, contemplating Buddhism's emblematic lotus. "It's only grit that makes the radiance possible."



Big Swiss, *by Jen Beagin (Scribner).* Greta, the aimless protagonist of this darkly comic novel, works as a transcriptionist for a sex-and-relationship coach—"Greta liked knowing people's secrets"—and quickly becomes obsessed with one of her employer's clients, whom she nicknames Big Swiss. She appreciates Big Swiss's blunt honesty and her impatience with people "who can't stop saying the word 'trauma.'" After a chance meeting in a dog park, the two women begin an affair, which causes Greta to question various aspects of her life: her residence in a near-uninhabitable farmhouse, the suicide of her mother when she was thirteen, her own suicidal impulses. Big Swiss, Greta reflects, may have something to teach her "about eradicating self-pity and perhaps replacing it with something productive."



Age of Vice, *by Deepti Kapoor (Riverhead).* The body count in this baroque tale of avarice and corruption in contemporary India is high: five migrants are dead by the end of the first sentence. The novel moves from the slums of New Delhi to its most exclusive enclaves, from rural Uttar Pradesh to London, following the lives of three people: Ajay, a bodyguard who was sold into servitude by his impoverished mother; his boss Sunny Wadia, the pleasure-loving scion of a powerful crime family; and Neda, a journalist who falls for Sunny and his extravagant life style. Each attempts to change the trajectory of his or her life; each fails, foiled by the grinding logic of this brutal and deeply unequal society.

POP MUSIC

DRILL BITS

Central Cee brings Americans on a tour of British hip-hop.

BY CARRIE BATTAN

The rapper performed a freestyle explaining U.K. slang, which quickly went viral.

One Thursday evening last month, the rapper Central Cee performed in New York City for the first time in his young and rapidly ascendant career. Central Cee—or Cench, as his fans affectionately call him—is British, and a Manhattan stage can sometimes feel like a proving ground for a newcomer. Instead, thanks to the familiarizing power of the Internet, the frenzied, sold-out show, which was at Irving Plaza, felt like a homecoming. Cench once rapped that he's "not performin' if I can't come with all of the guys," but in a gesture of confidence he began the show alone, backed only by an impassioned d.j., who queued up tracks behind his laptop, shouting lyrics into a microphone at key moments. This tactic, usually deployed to drum up excitement, was, by and large, unnecessary; the audience had come prepared to sing along to every word. "How many of you lot have ever been to London before?" Cench asked the crowd, eliciting a wave of screams. "I'm all the way in New York," he said, and added, "I hope I can paint a picture for you to understand where I come from."

Onstage, Cench wore an oversized chain and a classic Yankees cap. The latter might have simply been a topical accessory, but it also brought to mind the shared DNA of contemporary New York rap and Cench's music. In the past three years, Cench has become one of the most prominent ambassadors of the U.K.'s thriving drill scene. Drill, originally inspired by a brutalist wave of hip-hop from Chicago, has become a dominant strain of British rap in the past decade. The signature drill sound—characterized by cold, off-kilter 808s and swaggering gruffness—was eventually exported back to the States by way of Brooklyn rappers. Their sound has, in recent years, crept into the mainstream, adding a truly international chapter to the history of street rap. Across the pond, Cench is a home-town hero, but to a New York crowd he offered an intoxicating mix of the exotic and the familiar.

As his music has travelled farther from home, Cench has often acted as a game tour guide to anyone new to the universe of British rap. Last fall, he visited an American hip-hop institution, the Los Angeles radio station Power 106 FM. He was there for an appearance on a show hosted by L.A. Leakers, who are best known for a series of beloved YouTube videos in which guests freestyle. Freestyling is not exactly au courant among young American rappers, but it has been crucial to Cench's success. He first made a name for himself in 2015, when he appeared on the prominent U.K. music platform Link Up TV. Back then, he was in the early stages of crafting his style, which was dense, digressive, and diaristic, full of references to intensely difficult lived experiences. But seven years later, during his L.A. Leakers appearance, his freestyling had taken on an air of levity. He performed a clever educational rap skit explaining the differences between British and American slang. "We don't trap in abandoned buildings, shots get hit out of vacant flats / In other words, 'apartments,' hidden compartments get detached," he rapped.

The lyrics were, in keeping with the modern approach to freestyling, too well crafted to have been impromptu, but the performance was such an acrobatic (and funny) feat of storytelling that the video quickly went viral. The song has become a staple of Cench's

ILLUSTRATION BY DENNIS ERIKSSON

live shows. “You want to learn some U.K. slang?” he asked the crowd in New York, before launching into the L.A. Leakers bit. Cench’s loquacious lyrical style didn’t dampen the crowd’s ability to sing along. Audience members relished the opportunity to show off their knowledge, proudly reciting U.K. street slang, such as “leng” (sexy girls), “skengs” (guns), “nanks” (pocketknives), and “prang” (paranoid). “In London, I’m ‘verified,’” Cench rapped. “In N.Y., I’m ‘valid.’”

The influence of U.K. drill has spread widely, but few British rappers have broken out in the United States. Cench is one of the rare exceptions. Reared in West London, a hotbed of rap talent and gang warfare, Cench was exposed to a variety of local influences. The mixtape “17,” one of his early releases to streaming platforms, from 2017, was more like R. & B. than like rap, and it sounds as if it drew heavily from the Caribbean influences that surrounded him. He often filtered his vocals through Auto-Tune. This was a move he later scorned, as he developed a more unforgiving street-rap style. “Turn off the Auto-Tune, let’s hear how you really rap,” he taunts on “Day in the Life,” a standout from his 2021 mixtape, “Wild West.” He punctuates the line with a snide endcap. “Ha-ha,” he quips.

In an interview with a British publication in 2021, Cench discussed “Wild West.” “It is all drill,” he said. “Well, actually, I don’t know if I do drill, or what it exactly is.” Although he picked up steam as a drill star, earning the affection of celebrities including Drake and Ed Sheeran, Cench’s crossover moment came by way of American pop music. Last summer, he released a track called “Doja,” named for the chart-topping chameleon Doja Cat. The song relies heavily on a sample of Eve’s slinky 2001 hit “Let Me Blow Ya Mind.” If sampling was once meant to display a producer’s credibility through the use of esoteric source material, it has become a much blunter tool in the age of TikTok. Now Y2K-era hits are being used to add rocket fuel to an artist’s career. The road-tested appeal of “Let Me Blow Ya Mind” turned Cench into a global pop crossover.

There are plenty of reasons that someone like Cench would want to graduate beyond the confines of drill’s unsparing style. There are personal and commercial rewards to be had by making sweeter songs. But, for British rappers, evolving one’s style beyond street rap is also a genuine matter of survival. In the U.S., there are ongoing debates about whether rap lyrics that mention drug use or violence should be admissible in court as evidence of intent to commit a crime. In the U.K., where there are fewer protections against censorship, authorities already comb through rappers’ lyrics and music videos for legal ammunition. Digga D, another rapper from West London—and a huge breakout talent in the drill scene—was ordered by a judge, in 2018, to cease releasing any music that referred to gang violence. He also has to notify the police twenty-four hours before putting out new music, and to provide them with the lyrics, until at least 2025. This policing practice—and moral panic—has an outsized effect not just on the careers of individuals but on the genre as a whole. It has likely compelled British rappers to be nimble in evolving their slang in an effort to outsmart the police. For Cench, turning violent slang into a cutesy educational shtick for digital audiences, rather than crafting world-weary street-corner narratives, could also be an incidental act of self-preservation.

Cench seems to be actively grappling with this push and pull, even during his live shows. At the concert in New York, he tempered the expectations of anyone in the crowd who might have expected wall-to-wall party music. “Anybody can do the turn-up thing,” he said. But when it came time to close the show, everyone was prepared for the grand finale, “Doja.” In an effort to pay respect to the song’s origins, Cench’s d.j. has made a habit of playing a snippet of the original Eve song first. In New York, this caused a rare moment of boredom. When Cench launched into his own version of the song, however, the audience roared to life. He pointed the microphone into the crowd, prompting it to complete the performance on his behalf, confident that everyone in the room spoke his language. ♦

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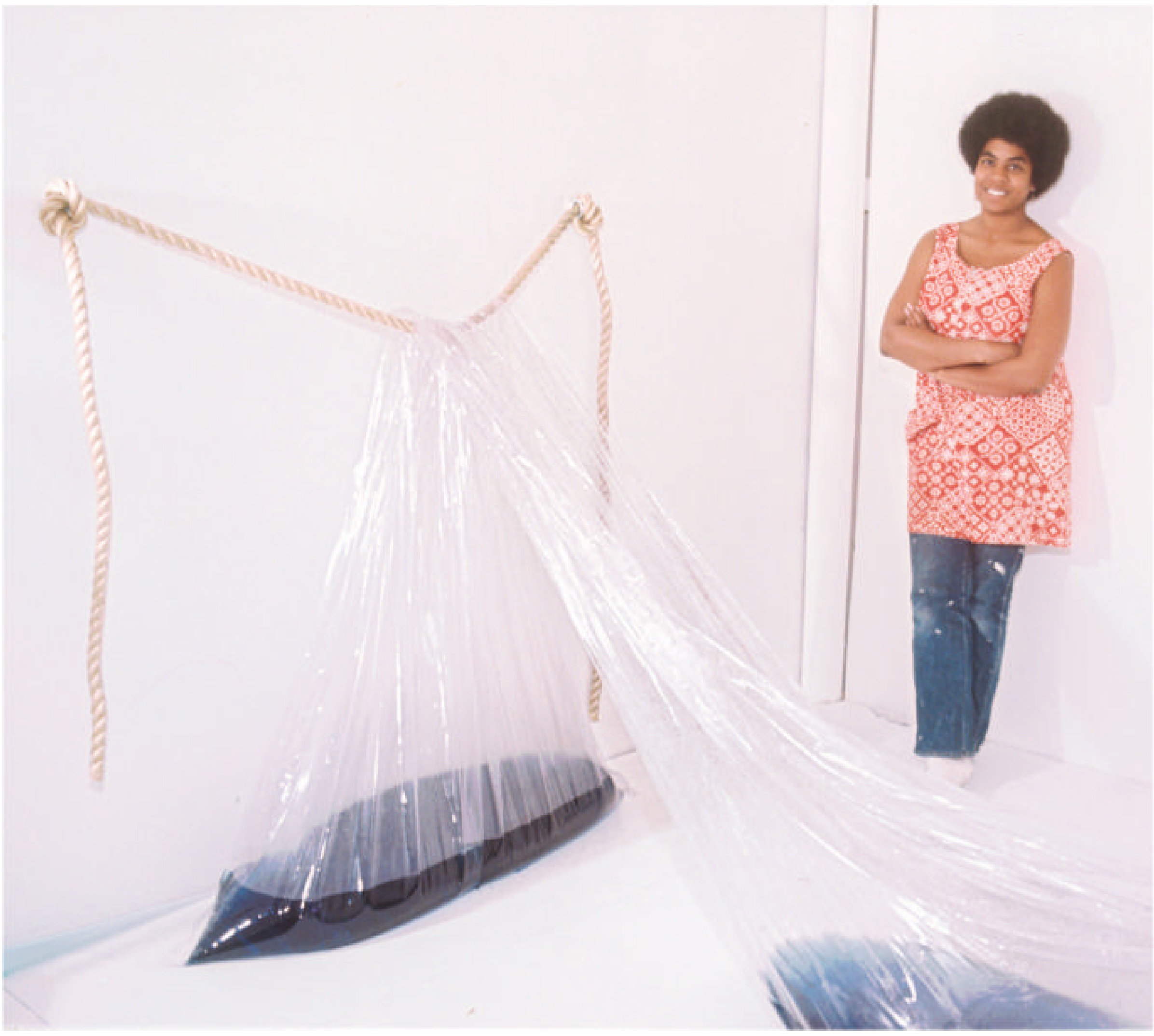
THE GOOD EARTH

Senga Nengudi’s journeys through air, water, and sand.

BY HILTON ALS



The artist, photographed with “Water Composition II,” circa 1970.

SENGA NENGUDI / COURTESY TILTON GALLERY

It must have been in the fall of 2011 that I first saw the great Senga Nengudi’s work. That was when the art historian and curator Kellie Jones unveiled her landmark exhibition “Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980” at L.A.’s Hammer Museum. An extensive and enriching display, the show included pieces by a phenomenal range of creators, among them Nengudi, John Outterbridge, Suzanne Jackson, Maren Hassinger, David Hammons, Betye Saar, Alonzo Davis, and Houston Conwill—artists who helped define a time and a place that their East Coast contemporaries knew little, if anything, about. Walking into the show was like entering a new atmosphere, especially if you primarily associated the two decades that Jones was exploring with Pop art and minimalism and the few “stars” of those movements. The artists represented in Jones’s powerful “other” world operated out of what I now see as a sort of spiritual necessity, a desire to use their materials—paint, wood, wire rope, what have you—to communicate the complexities of their inner view.

Of all the beautiful and startling art I saw in “Now Dig This!,” it was Senga Nengudi’s that wouldn’t let me or my imagination go. I knew nothing about her, except what I learned from the show’s catalogue—that she was born Sue Ellen Irons, in Chicago in 1943, and moved to Pasadena, and then Los Angeles, as a child. Later, I read that during her years at Dorsey High School Nengudi was subject to a kind of silent segregation, with Black students staying in a certain area at lunchtime. She trained with the dancer and choreographer Carmen de Lavallade at Lester Horton’s legendary dance studio in West Hollywood. (Horton had a great interest in Native American dance and rituals.) In 1965, as a student at California State University, she received a scholarship from the Modern Dance Club of Los Angeles, and, at about the same time, began teaching art at the Watts Towers Arts Center. Through a graduate program, she travelled to Japan in 1966, attracted by the idea of the Gutai Art Association, a group of young Japanese artists whose focus was on “happenings” and experimentation—breaking the frame to make work that was physically free, unbounded.

Nengudi’s art from the early seventies reflects these experiences—and African culture, too. In 1974, a boyfriend from Zaire advised her on her name change. In Duala, the language of Cameroon, *senga* means “to listen or hear,” and a *nengudi* is a woman who comes to power as a traditional healer. The artist David Hammons, a friend of Nengudi’s, says that she couldn’t relate to the American Black nationalism of those years, with its inherently patriarchal structure. For Nengudi, the only reason to have a structure was to play within its parameters—and then explode them. Included in “Now Dig This!” was a piece from a series called “R.S.V.P.” (1977/2003), which uses commonplace materials—pantyhose, sand—to create biomorphic shapes that evoke the body in extremis, women twisting and turning to slip into a material that basically encases them. In a statement about the series, Nengudi wrote, “I am working with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body. From tender, tight beginnings to sagging . . . the body can only stand so much push and pull until it gives way, never to resume its original shape.”

Nengudi draws on the tension between freedom and resistance, collapse and resurrection. From the beginning of her career, she established her own poetics of the body and how it moves through the world, a poetics that is unimpeded by racial distinctions; Nengudi takes from the cultures that have influenced her and recasts them all in her own image. As I looked at Nengudi’s nylon stretching from one wall to another, it occurred to me that her true soul sister, artistically speaking, was Eva Hesse. For her 1970 work “Untitled (Rope Piece),” Hesse dipped rope into liquid latex, then hung it from the ceiling and walls; the latex hardened, creating a weblike structure that dangled from the looped tangle of rope. It is art weighed down, just as Nengudi's pantyhose are weighed down and stretched out by all those absent, accommodating women. Hesse made "Untitled (Rope Piece)" as she was dying, of brain cancer; Nengudi began her "R.S.V.P." work after the birth of her first child.

Life and death and the transition between them, with art as an expression of both continuums (because in Nengudi's world nothing ever dies; it evolves): this is just one of the themes you can find in Nengudi's delicate and memorable eponymous exhibition at Dia Beacon, through February, 2025. With the curator Matilde Guidelli-Guidi, Nengudi puts the Dia's impeccable, calm space on notice. Unlike the fabulous John Chamberlain and Blinky Palermo showcases that are up concurrently, Nengudi's art doesn't sit still, content to be on display. While the show isn't a retrospective—you won't find the "R.S.V.P." pieces here—it does convey her now fifty-year-old philosophical belief in *flow*, in how audiences can move with, away from, or toward a work, depending on their own unique energy and the energy of the installation. But Nengudi is no show-off; she's both too humble and too self-assured to feel that she has to come out "on top." Instead of treating her concerns lightly—or heavily—she lets them just *be;* they are as natural to her as breathing.

The show is a kind of happening across five galleries. It has a sense of play that only adds to the feeling of intimacy. The first thing you see is "Wet Night—Early Dawn—Scat Chant—Pilgrim's Song" (1996), a multimedia work that includes a selection of spray-can paintings on cardboard, covered in bubble wrap and dry-cleaning bags. Bubble wrap makes another appearance here: at the center of the room is a large carpet of the stuff; Nengudi has said that it is meant to evoke the sound of firecrackers in potentia. You may not know specifically what she is referencing here, and that's O.K., because you can feel it: you are embarking on a journey in which art (those spray-can paintings) is at home with impermanence (all that plastic wrapping). In the corners of the room, Nengudi has sprinkled earth-toned pigment, mixed with what looks like glitter, rivulets of color that likely shift and spread with foot traffic. On one wall, she has drawn a red body—it's the only figurative representation in the show—that appears to be flying in a circle. When Toni Morrison wrote "Song of Solomon" (1977), she was, in part, inspired by stories she'd heard of Black enslaved people flying back to Africa. The flight of Nengudi's figure feels like a form of release—of energy whirling and then landing somewhere. In our dreams, perhaps.

Movement, flow: Nengudi, a visual compatriot of the musician and spiritualist Alice Coltrane, is fascinated by water and what it can make us imagine. "Water Composition II" (1970/2019) and "Water Composition III" (1970/2018) share a gallery in the show. In "Water Composition II" (it is an especially large work—more than fifteen feet wide), a piece of plastic stretches between ropes anchored on either wall. Nestled in that plastic is a rectangular transparent vinyl bag filled with blue-tinted water. Two other bags of blue water sit on the floor. The piece as a whole feels like a kind of ark or boat that travels through your mind in its own expanse of blue. It wouldn't be hard to see in this exercise of color and form the influence of the artist Dan Flavin, but Flavin didn't sketch out his ideas about water and light until 1974, by which time Nengudi had temporarily stopped making these pieces. (She was put off by the growing popularity of water beds.) In a 2013 interview conducted in Colorado, where she has lived since 1989, she said that her water compositions were "the beginning of my sensual self"; the sculptures, she added, had a "sense of body" if you felt them.

When the water works have been absorbed to maximum effect, Nengudi and Guidelli-Guidi present a new visual field in the last big room. Viewing "Sandmining B" (2020) is like standing by a playground sandbox, full of bright-colored curved tubes and other beautifully fashioned detritus that has been forgotten or left behind to be picked up on another day. (A soft and lovely soundtrack plays in the room, featuring, among other artists, the California-raised cornettist Butch Morris.) Pausing for a moment, we wonder where we are now, where we've ended up after all our travels through air and sea and land, accompanying Nengudi on her internal wanderings. The shores of our own being? Or smack dab in the middle of Nengudi's patch of the world, where, if we can place our trust in metaphors and art, we're bound to feel something like transcendence? ♦

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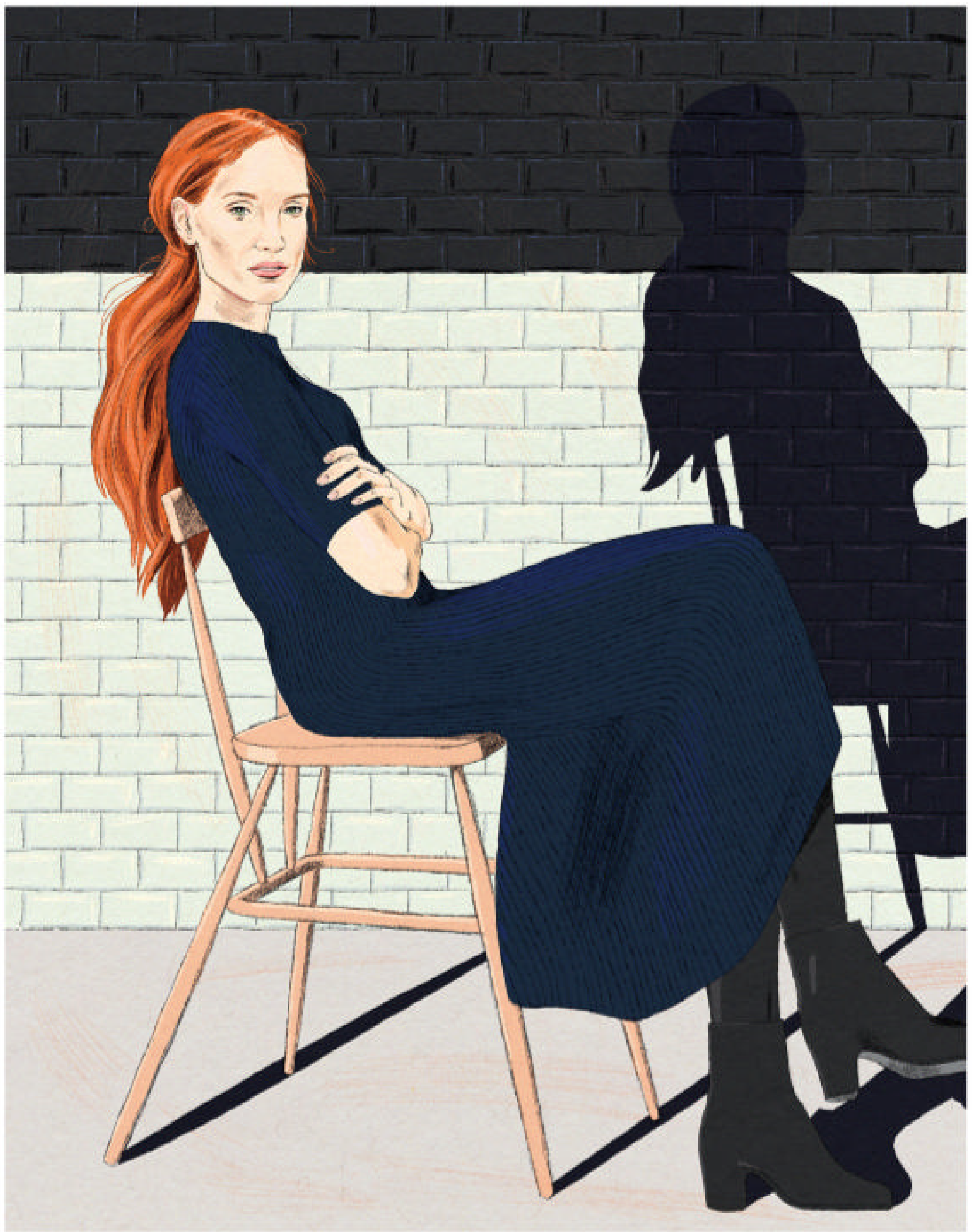
CLOSE LISTENING

Jessica Chastain stars in "A Doll's House."

BY HELEN SHAW



For the long quarter hour before "A Doll's House" begins, Jessica Chastain sits looking at the audience in the Hudson Theatre as people fill up the seats. She's in a plain dark dress on a plain wooden chair on a plain bleak stage. A turntable moves her in slow circles—she looks like the last lonely dish left on a lazy Susan. The air throbs with dread-inducing electronic tones; the five other cast members enter and sit with their backs to her, not yet caught up in her sad merry-go-round. Whatever else Chastain's Nora will be, at least we know she has sufficient inner resources to keep herself company while staring through the fourth wall.

In the current Broadway production of Henrik Ibsen's 1879 drama, adapted by Amy Herzog and directed by Jamie Lloyd, Nora has three children (present only as giggling voice-overs); a husband, Torvald (Arian Moayed); a nanny (Tasha Lawrence); a family friend, Dr. Rank (Michael Patrick Thornton), who adores her; and an old friend, Kristine (Jesmille Darbouze), who wants to fix her. Nora also has a creditor turned blackmailer, Krogstad (Okieriete Onaodowan), who comes the closest to understanding her. On the surface, Nora is a dizzy, much indulged wife, skilled at twining Torvald around her finger. That laughing manipulation, though, hides her big secret, a loan, from Krogstad, that she's been paying off. As the play begins, Nora seems almost in the clear—blue skies ahead! But the real thundercloud is her marriage: a perpetual (and still familiar) weather system of condescension, mutual untruth, and socially endorsed sexism.

Throughout, Chastain maintains her pre-show sense of availability to the audience. Even in the gathering gloom—the lighting designer Jon Clark has chosen white L.E.D.s so cold they seem like moonlight—she still seems to be looking at us. What else would she look at? Lloyd's ascetic production is like the most polished staged reading on earth: it eliminates nearly every conventional marker of character, location, gesture. Actors wear sleek, dark, modern clothes, melting vampirically into the shadows. The stage is bare to the bricks; the only "set" is a white stripe painted on the tall black walls of the theatre. Ibsen productions are usually crowded with furniture and brocade curtains and telltale letters, but Lloyd doesn't permit props. When a guy says he's smoking a cigar, he doesn't even lift his hand. There's no cigar.

I've seen four Jamie Lloyd productions: a stripped-down "Betrayal," with Tom Hiddleston; a stripped-down "Cyrano de Bergerac," with James McAvoy; a stripped-down "The Seagull," with Emilia Clarke; and now this "A Doll's House." Lloyd clearly has a tool kit: a Soutra Gilmour-designed non-set, full of the spare glamour of a photo shoot, and a sound design (here by Ben and Max Ringham) that relies on heavy vocal amplification. As was the case with Lloyd's "Seagull," his "Doll's House" features microphones taped so close to the actors' mouths that they can murmur, even *breathe*, their text. This method kills two birds with one soundboard. First, it bridges that tricky gap between a performer's cinematic style and her theatre technique, since an actor can behave as if she were being shot in closeup. Second, it brings the movie stars—there's always a movie star—sonically very near; the audience hears them almost as if through headphones. That privacy-in-public sensation is erotic, and, not coincidentally, flirtation scenes are Lloyd's best. Thornton's delightful Dr. Rank drowns in Nora's eyes at one point, and you can hear his breath hitch—before he realizes she's only teasing. (The effect

Jamie Lloyd applies his classics-via-A.S.M.R. treatment to Ibsen.

ILLUSTRATION BY KARLOTTA FREIER

isn't uniform. I polled people in various parts of the auditorium, and those with less than excellent hearing couldn't always understand the show.)

In the case of "The Seagull," which I saw last year in London, this classics-via-A.S.M.R. style was thrilling, even revelatory. Extreme quietness forces an audience into its own stillness, which becomes absorption, which can become a nearly unbearable state of tension. Much of Chekhov's humor and pathos lies in throwaway comments, and microphones encourage underplaying: the production felt like seeing an Old Master painting with its murky varnish cleaned away.

"A Doll's House," though, partly resists Lloyd's treatment. For one thing, his directorial touch can get heavy: the lighting grid drops portentously any time Nora feels the metaphorical walls closing in; Lloyd keeps Nora in her chair even when it doesn't make sense (she does a goofy-looking dance there); the unrelenting darkness tends toward self-seriousness. Ibsen's own style also has varnish built in, and his more bombastic lines can sound odd in closeup, as when anyone talks (extremely incorrectly) about medical science or when Nora waxes romantic. When she says, "The most beautiful thing is about to happen," referring to the sacrifices she assumes Torvald will make, she seems not just deluded but deranged.

But the production is gorgeous in its details. Herzog's adaptation keeps snug to the original; though she cuts away repetition, conflates servants, and modernizes speech, she allows herself little leeway in terms of character or structure. Nora's bird-witted self-preoccupation was always there, and Herzog, one of our greatest dialogue crafters, smooths the play's lines so we see its face. Herzog is friskiest and most inventive with Torvald, who seems slimier than usual—he keeps calling Nora "baby," and Moayed, gliding creepily around, lets the endearment plop out of his mouth like a wet octopus. Herzog and the show also emphasize the play's delicate crosshatching: in Krogstad, Ibsen shaded a melodrama villain so finely that he turned him into his heroine's psychological double. Thornton elevates Dr. Rank into the production's most seductive performance; Onaodowan makes Krogstad its most poignant.

When "A Doll's House" was first produced, in Norway, in 1879, it rocked the establishment. Its portrait of the insufficiency of marriage smashed through European buttonhook respectability, prompting outraged sermons and counter-plays—there was enough backlash that Ibsen changed the ending, at least for its première in Germany. That obsession has barely abated; just a few years ago, Lucas Hnath's "A Doll's House, Part 2" zoomed around the country—amazingly, theatregoers were still hungry for a sequel. But fame obscures, and, while I think most audiences know that there's a crucial door slam somewhere in the story, they might not know that Ibsen wasn't just denouncing nineteenth-century hypocrisies. "A Doll's House" contains still relevant critique about the way intimate behaviors can intertwine and choke one another, and there's a bleaker idea yet about the incompatibility of motherhood and serving the true self. Listen closely, and you can hear old mutton-chopped, individualist Ibsen building up his world view and exploding it, over and over.

The question of what this particular production is about, though, has as much to do with Chastain, or perhaps with the icon "Jessica Chastain." The show displays her like a coin on velvet: there's a constellation of meanings in her jawline, her pale profile standing out against the black of the back wall, the design's inky shades setting off her vivid red hair. Maybe it's because of the turntable, but I kept imagining her performance rotating in and out of synch with the play—sometimes her husky voice and palpable strength show us Nora, sometimes it's Chastain sitting alongside the role, sometimes the actor and the part drift a hundred and eighty degrees away from each other, only to return to correspondence.

The production begins with our contemplating (and many of us photographing) Chastain onstage; it finishes with a coup de théâtre that implies that the movie star can, if she chooses, get away from the whole invasive mechanism. But I thought Nora's most triumphant moment came in the middle of the show. The voice-over children tumble in, wanting to play hide-and-seek. As in so many of the drama's countertextual moments, it's implied that Nora moves in some way, but Chastain doesn't shift from her chair—to hide, she just closes her eyes. The lights fade on her bright face, and she sits for an instant in the vulnerable dark. At last, she's done it: she's here, but she's gone. The woman-mother-character-star manages to be both fully present and fully private. And then the lights come back on and the world turns again. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Akeem Roberts, must be received by Sunday, March 19th. The finalists in the March 6th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 3rd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

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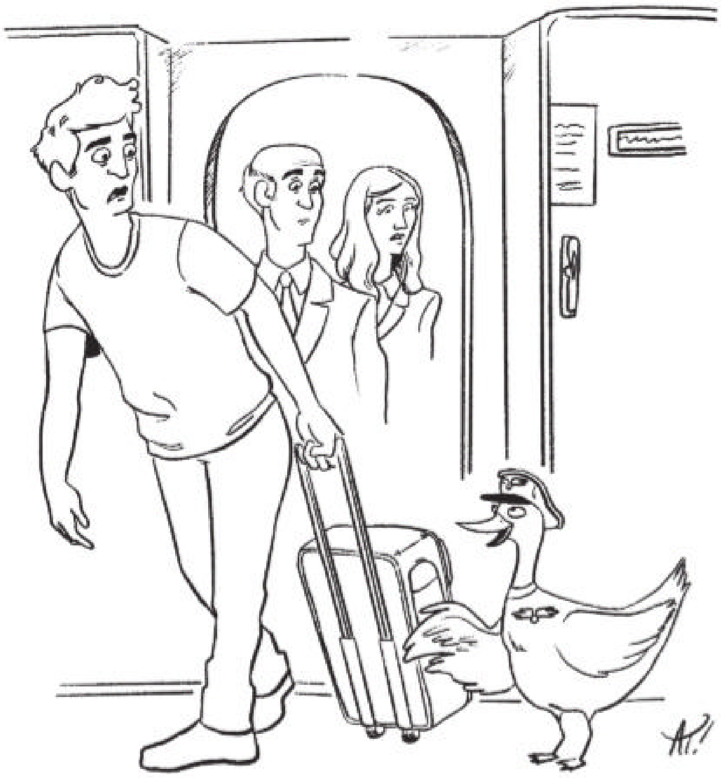

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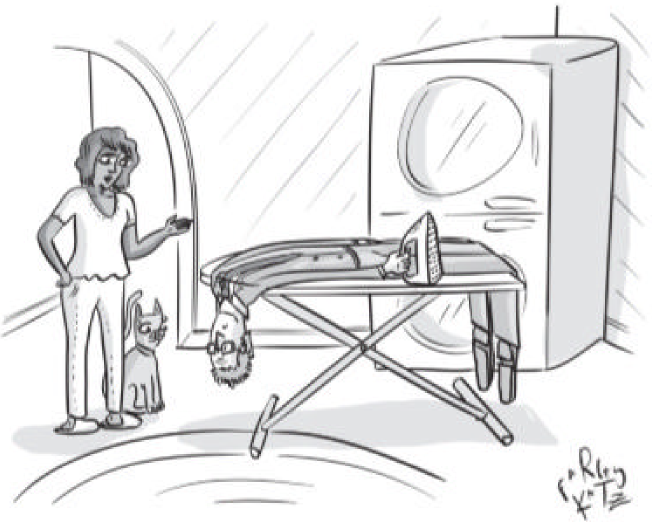
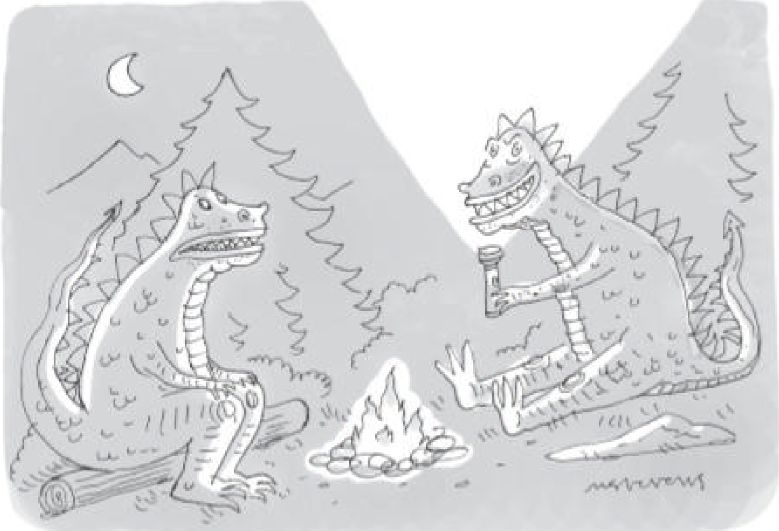


"Don't worry, I'll still love you when you have wrinkles."
Kara Nagle, Portland, Ore.

"I'll fold."
Lawrence Wood, Chicago, Ill.

"You missed your forehead."
Peter Orum, Sydney, Australia

THE WINNING CAPTION



"I dunno—this is what those campers were doing before we ate them."
Doug Kolic, Toronto, Ont.

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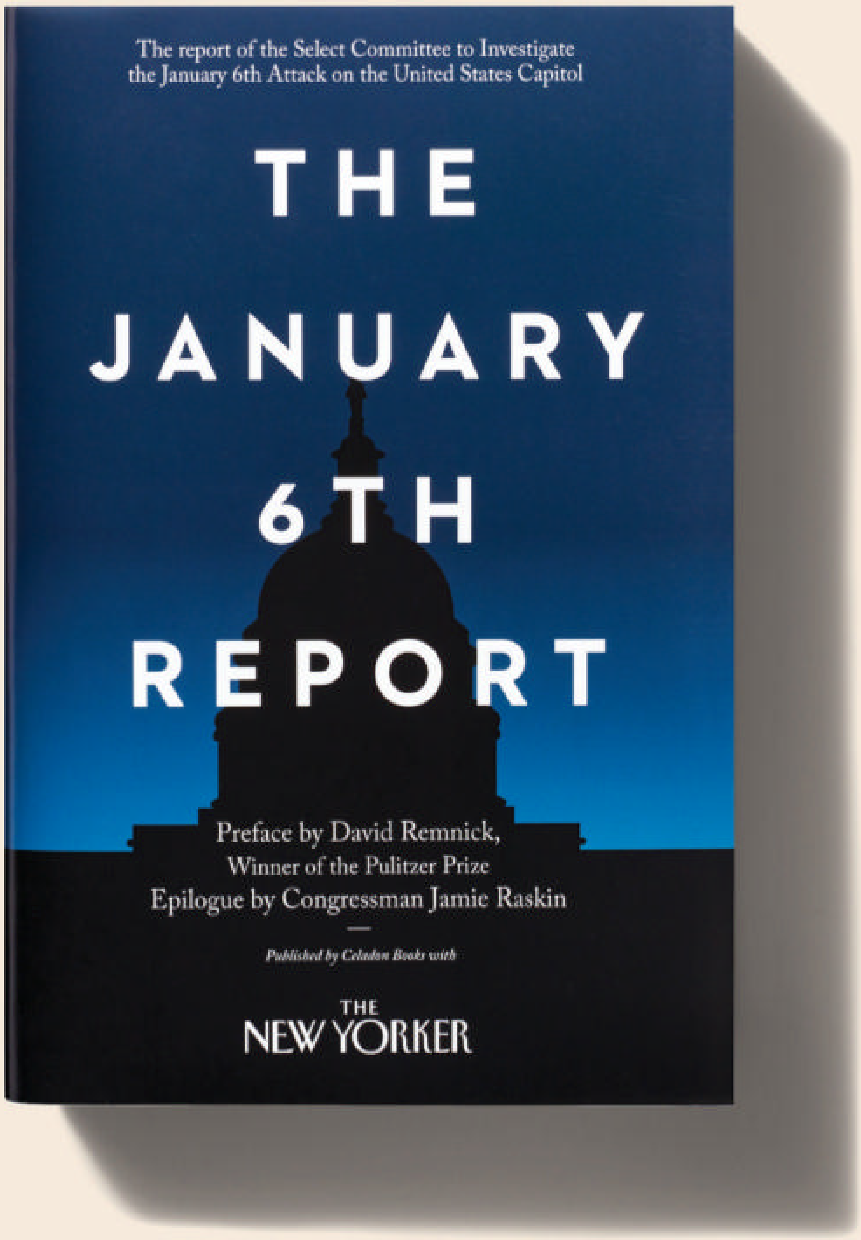
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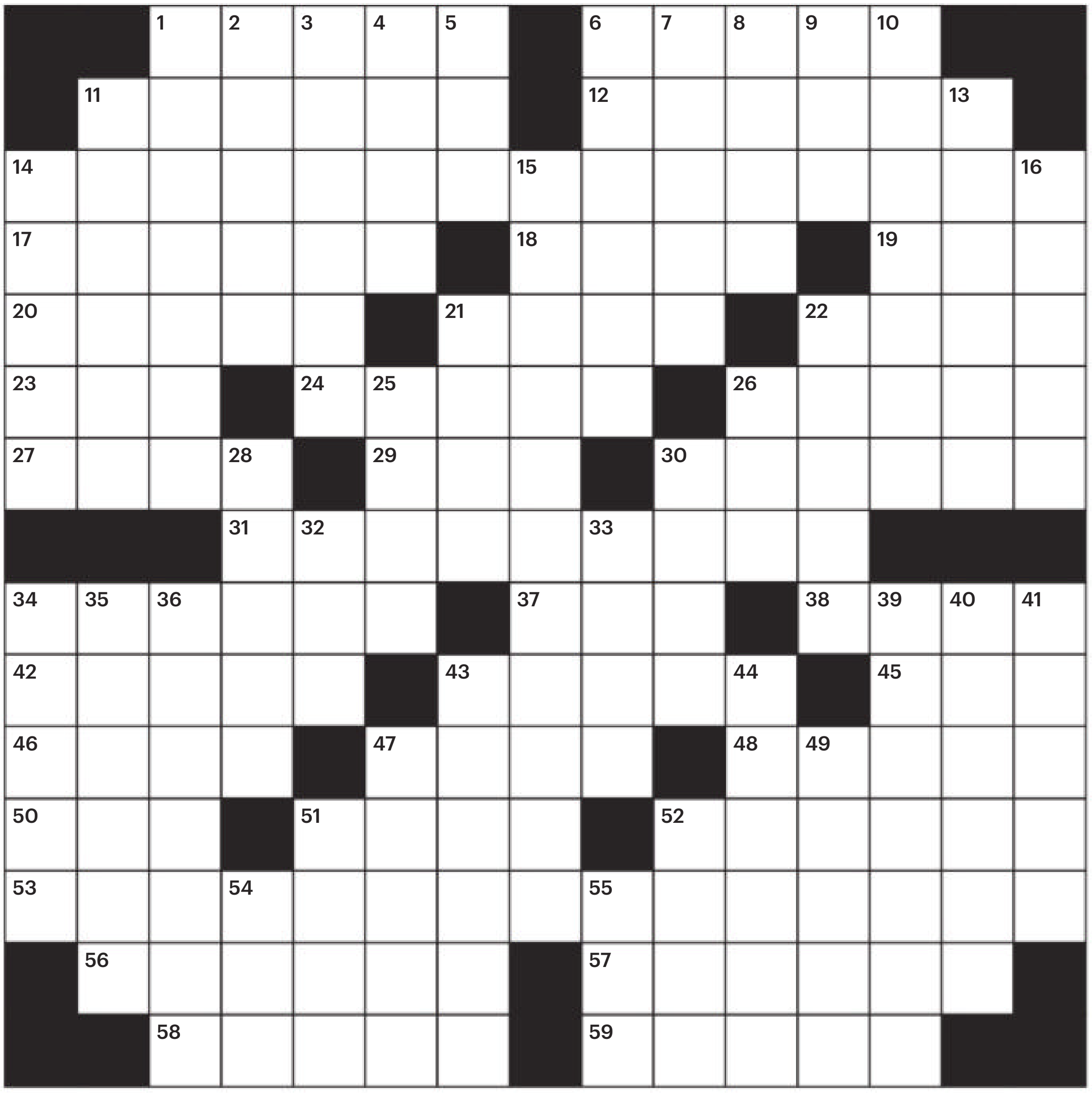
THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY CAITLIN REID

ACROSS

1 Targets of microblading
6 Short-lived romance
11 Taiwan's capital
12 Defy
14 1984 mockumentary whose soundtrack includes "Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight" and "Stonehenge"
17 Give in
18 Whirlpool
19 Bread that usually has caraway seeds
20 "Victory is yours"
21 Droops
22 Highlander's garb
23 Big bird whose males incubate eggs
24 Let some expletives fly
26 ___ Grigio
27 Pre-college exams, for short
29 "Everything Everywhere ___ at Once"
30 Unfed and seeing red
31 Board game with a path through the Peppermint Forest and the Lagoon of Lord Licorice
34 In the direction of
37 "I ___ Rhythm" (jazz standard)
38 Breezy and open, like an atrium
42 Nonreactive, like neon and argon
43 Stuffed
45 Bartender frequently prank-called by Bart Simpson
46 Common bathroom flooring
47 Some Halloween decorations
48 Author and former First Lady Michelle
50 "2 funny!"
51 "O.K., I'll ___" ("Tell me more")
52 Paltry
53 "And that's the final word on the matter!"
56 One who might "hang ten"
57 Beings who are out of this world?
58 Proverbial waste-maker
59 Ill at ease

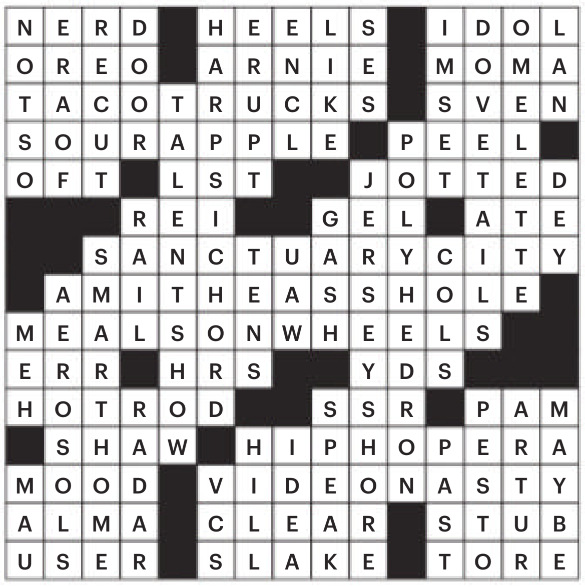


■	■	1	2	3	4	5	■	6	7	8	9	10	■	■
■	11						■	12					13	■
14							15							16
17						■	18				■	19		
20					■	21				■	22			
23			■	24	25				■	26				
27			28	■	29			■	30					
■	■	■	31	32				33				■	■	■
34	35	36				■	37			■	38	39	40	41
42					■	43				44	■	45		
46				■	47				■	48	49			
50			■	51				■	52					
53			54					55						
■	56						■	57						■
■	■	58					■	59					■	■

DOWN

1 Save from financial ruin
2 Shows respect to a judge entering a courtroom
3 Offers one's two cents
4 Topeka-to-Denver direction
5 Familial nickname
6 "Mini" appliance in a hotel room
7 Lets borrow
8 "By Jove!"
9 Nada
10 Barely there underwear
11 "___ & Louise" (1991 film)
13 First name of the singer adored by Swifties
14 Gives a go
15 They're often depicted standing behind St. Peter
16 Word before cash or officer
21 Auctioneer's shout
22 "Ish"
25 What may be held for a spell?
26 Wok, for one
28 Startle
30 Dislike and then some
32 Contents of the Louvre or the Getty
33 Quite a few
34 It's often on the spine of a book
35 They've been known to make people cry
36 ". . . Obviously!"
39 Word at the center of a mosaic in Central Park's Strawberry Fields
40 Casanovas
41 Ache (for)
43 Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," e.g.
44 Offs
47 Bathroom cleaner?
49 Foursome on a diamond
51 The closest of pals, briefly
52 Backless shoe
54 "Black Widow" collaborator Rita
55 Animal venerated by ancient Egyptians

Solution to the previous puzzle:



N	E	R	D	■	H	E	E	L	S	■	I	D	O	L
O	R	E	O	■	A	R	N	I	E	■	M	O	M	A
T	A	C	O	T	R	U	C	K	S	■	S	V	E	N
S	O	U	R	A	P	P	L	E	■	P	E	E	L	■
O	F	T	■	L	S	T	■	■	J	O	T	T	E	D
■	■	■	R	E	I	■	■	G	E	L	■	A	T	E
■	■	S	A	N	C	T	U	A	R	Y	C	I	T	Y
■	A	M	I	T	H	E	A	S	S	H	O	L	E	■
M	E	A	L	S	O	N	W	H	E	E	L	S	■	■
E	R	R	■	H	R	S	■	■	Y	D	S	■	■	■
H	O	T	R	O	D	■	■	S	S	R	■	P	A	M
■	S	H	A	W	■	H	I	P	H	O	P	E	R	A
M	O	O	D	■	V	I	D	E	O	N	A	S	T	Y
A	L	M	A	■	C	L	E	A	R	■	S	T	U	B
U	S	E	R	■	S	L	A	K	E	■	T	O	R	E

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